

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

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My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



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Prologue: Your Weapon of Choice Is...?

Most people, when asked about their impression of a certain region—yes, *that* region—were sure to answer, “It’s a place you mustn’t enter.”

This was true for *most* people. Within the borders of this region, dangerous beasts roamed freely and were known to attack unsuspecting visitors without warning, bringing their victims’ lives to an untimely and permanent end.

To the world’s inhabitants, this place was known as the Black Forest.

There wasn’t a single soul who didn’t know of the infamous wooded expanse and the labyrinthine forest depths that oft confounded travelers. It was home to wild animals like wolves and bears. According to the rumors, even magical beasts made their nests in the forest.

Presently, a lone shadow wove through the fearsome Black Forest. Despite the surrounding gloom, the traveler had her hood up, so it was impossible to see her face. Yet, it could be surmised by her figure that the traveler was likely a “her.”

The woman picked her way through the trees. She had emerged only moments ago from a confrontation with a pack of wolves...and emerged victorious. Though she was confident she could repel any attacks that came her way, she didn’t want to kill unnecessarily. This wish was part sentiment and part practicality; the less chance of injury and the less energy she wasted, the better.

The forest itself was massive, but the woman knew where she needed to go. In order to make it safely to her destination, it was imperative that she didn’t waste any time on superfluous things.

During her trek, she occasionally paused to take in her surroundings. The dense foliage obstructed much of the light, but here and there sunlight still found its way through the leaves and branches, illuminating the forest around her and spotlighting the lonely blooms of flowers.

“This is a good forest. Except for the wolves,” the traveler mumbled. Birdsong, quiet though it was, filled her ears. She took a deep breath. “How rare for a place outside the demon kingdom to have such a dense concentration of magical energy. That discovery

alone makes this trip worth it.”

A slice of the woman’s crooked smile peeked out from the shadows of her hood.

Static magic pooled in the demon kingdom, making the environment inhospitable for humans. Magic in the human realm was just the opposite, though it seemed less concentrated—she had yet to find a region with as much magical energy as this forest.

Supposing a disaster were to strike the demon kingdom, refugees might indeed be able to save themselves by fleeing to the Black Forest. Such an escape was barred to the traveler herself, but the realization nevertheless lightened her heart.

She hurried forward with an extra spring in her step, eager to find her target even a *little* faster.

The woman soon arrived at her destination.

“Exactly where she said it would be.”

She stood in front of a treeless space that looked as if it’d been cleared by the twirl of a sword brandished by something giant. In the middle of the clearing stood a wooden cabin.

A second building with stone walls hugged up against this cabin, and thick plumes of smoke climbed out of a chimney on its roof. A muffled clanging echoed from within and resounded softly throughout the clearing. That was surely where the work took place.

The traveler spied a door cut into the stone building and walked up to it. A depiction of a lovable chunky cat was carved into the wood. She raised a fist and rapped on the door.

After a brief moment, a man’s laid-back drawl came from inside. “Coming. Hold on a second.”

True to his word, the door swung open before long, revealing the figure of a man in his thirties. He was wearing an apron and had eyes that most people would be hard-pressed to call kind.

“Is this the forge of Master Eizo?” the woman asked in a somewhat low voice. She peeked in through the door and saw an adept-looking red-haired woman standing behind the man. When the traveler peered further into the room, she saw something that made her raise a brow.

Inside the forge was an elf.

The traveler had heard that one of the beastfolk, a dwarf, and a young lady of high standing lived here, but to think...an *elf* was in their party as well...

Unaware of the woman’s inner thoughts, the man nodded casually in response. “Yes. You’ve come to the right place.”

“Good. I am Ekaterina. Ekaterina Pisorante.”

“I see,” the man said. It appeared that the name didn’t ring any

bells.

The woman suddenly realized that she had yet to remove her hood. Her relief at finding her target had swept away all other thoughts.

“Do you not recognize my name?” she asked. “Perhaps it is not so well known here.”

The woman lowered her hood. She had dignified features, dark skin, and large horns sprouting from her head—all of these were characteristics distinctive to the demon race.

“You may know me as the demon queen,” Ekaterina stated. “I have heard that you will forge weapons for anyone who comes here alone, no matter their identity. Is that correct?”

The man’s eyes widened in shock. The demon queen watched him, a mischievous smile playing at her lips.

Chapter 1: The Family Who Lives in the Forest

After our usual trip into the city, we returned to the cabin. As always, the first thing we did was unload the cart and stow away the supplies.

“Where does this go?”

The question came from Samya, a tiger-type beastfolk. She was a longtime resident of this forest, and I’d rescued her a while back when she’d been injured in a bear attack.

I pointed. “Right there.”

“Gotcha,” she said, walking to put the supplies where I’d directed.

Next, Rike, a dwarven woman, came up to me. She was shouldering a bag of ore. It was worth mentioning that Rike was also my apprentice.

“Oh, can you put that over there?” I asked her.

“Will do, Boss,” she replied.

Diana, the young lady of the Eimoor family and the younger sister of Count Eimoor, was putting away household goods like bolts of cloth. Lidy, an elf, was helping with the food and ingredients.

I stepped outside where Krul—our family drake—was waiting. She’d joined our household a while ago. I’d expressed interest in owning a horse, and Camilo had instead offered Krul to us. Right now, she was snorting excitedly, still fired up from our journey. It had been a while since the last time she’d gotten to haul a cart over such a long distance.

And finally, our newest family member was Helen, a mercenary. However, she wouldn’t be able to return to that profession for some time due to some *trouble* with the neighboring empire, so she was currently staying with us.

With an extra set of hands, we had everything sorted away in no time.

Today, along with the usual goods, we had also purchased sets of bedding from Camilo. We put those away in the cabin’s newly built rooms, one of which would become Helen’s from now on.

In addition, we’d procured for Helen some daily necessities. Anything else she needed, we would buy as needed.

Helen had been borrowing clothing from Diana, who had been delighted to share, saying, “My brother packed me plenty from home.”

The clothes weren't exactly a perfect fit, but Helen was wearing them anyway, waiting until we had a chance to tailor them.

Once all the sorting work was done, I told Helen, "We save the nights after our city trips for free time. Spend it however you like."

"Really?" Helen said.

I nodded. "Yup." Of course, Helen didn't have much yet, so her options were limited.

"In that case, I'm going to check on the drake," she declared, vibrating with restlessness. It looked like she had been interested in Krul from the start.

Diana raised a hand and said, "I'll come along."

Good. Helen will be all right with Mama Diana by her side.

"I don't think anything will happen, but be careful anyway," I instructed.

Both of them nodded.

"Got it," Helen said.

"Understood," added Diana.

They started for the door, but just then, I remembered something I'd been meaning to tell the two of them.

"Diana," I called out to their backs, "by the way, Helen's going to be joining us during our sparring sessions starting from tonight."

Diana looked back at me, her eyes wide. "Really?"

Helen had been captured and held captive in the empire—we'd just returned from a mission to extract her from that predicament. However, the fact that she had needed rescuing didn't mean she was weak. Quite the opposite, actually. In one-on-one combat, Helen was stronger than I was, and I hoped that sparring would be a good way for her to regain some confidence.

"Yeah, I already talked about it with Helen," I explained.

The two of us had discussed it on the way home from the empire. She had been reluctant at first, but at my urging, she'd finally nodded. It had been a *light* nod, but she had assented nonetheless.

When Catalina, a servant of the Eimoor family, had heard that Helen would be sparring with me and Diana, she had remarked enviously, "Oh, were I as lucky as my lady."

Presently, Diana said to Helen, "I'm looking forward to learning from you."

"I'm not gonna hold back," Helen replied.

"So much the better," Diana said.

"No major injuries, please," I shouted at the two of them.

But they were chatting between themselves excitedly. *I wonder...how many of my words actually reached their ears?*

I couldn't see any downsides to this plan. Thinking about the future, any chance to improve our combat skills could only be a good

thing. Almost everyone in the family was a woman, which cast a lot of doubt on this old fossil's outdated notions from Earth about men having to take up the mantle of the fighter.

I was in the mood to do some work, so I headed to the workshop.

"Surrounded by women, eh," I muttered.

The fact that I was the only man in the house *had* bothered me in the past... But it wasn't as if I'd planned for this to happen. Even Krul was female!

A decent amount of time had passed since I'd first come to this world. Who would've thought that, even after all this time, every person I got along with was a woman?

It was true that I had grown close to Marius, Camilo, and the cook trio, but up until now there hadn't been any men who'd come to live with us. In this world, most men past a certain age would've had a regular profession, which would've made visiting our forge difficult indeed. In that sense, it wasn't strange at all that every visitor to the forge had been a woman, but still...isn't our family a little *too* unbalanced?

When I entered the forge, I glanced over at the *kamidana* shrine where I'd placed a goddess figurine. I couldn't help but think that her smile (never mind that I had carved it myself) looked suggestive.

We'd returned to the cabin a little past noon, and I worked in the forge until evening. Though I had been away from home for over a week, I didn't feel rusty, thanks in part to the fact that I had repaired swords as part of my cover while I'd been in the empire.

There was a second reason why I had seamlessly slipped back into my routine: I was actually relying on cheat abilities. They had been granted to me by a powerful entity called a Watchdog upon my relocation to this world.

Well, since I'm still in good condition, there shouldn't be any problems with me jumping into work properly tomorrow.

And so, I wrapped up for the day. As I was in the middle of tidying up, the wooden clackers that were strung up in the forge alerted me that the front door in the living space had been opened. My bet was that Diana and Helen had returned.

I heard animated chattering coming from the living room. Before long, the door to the forge was thrown open with a *bang*!

Unsurprisingly, Helen had been the one to open the door. She strolled in and said, "Shucks, Eizo, you're already done?"

"Yeah. The sun's started setting, and I wasn't working on anything that serious to begin with," I responded. "Did you want anything?"

"Not particularly. Rike said you were in here when I asked, so I thought I'd come and take a peek. That's it."

I thought I heard a trace of disappointment in Helen's voice, so I deliberately kept my tone upbeat and replied, "I'm starting a project tomorrow and I'll need your help on it. You'll be able to observe to your heart's content then."

"Huh? Are you serious?"

"Of course," I assured her. "I promised, didn't I?" I'd made her *that* promise when I'd rescued her, but maybe she'd already forgotten.

But contrary to what I was thinking, Helen replied, "Ah, yeah. Thanks." Her gaze was cast downward as she thanked me, and from her countenance, it appeared that she did actually remember.

"You can thank me once I'm done." I patted her lightly on the shoulder, and the move was somewhat clumsy (because she was taller than me). Then, I headed back into the living room.



The next morning, I went with Krul to fetch water from the lake, as was our regular routine. She looked happy to be going with me...I thought. I couldn't *actually* read the expressions of drakes, so my interpretation was part wishful thinking.

Since we were at the lake, I took the opportunity to wash myself as well, chatting with Krul all the while.

"Did Diana take over for me while I was gone?" I asked.

"*Kuluuu*," she chirruped.

I had no way of understanding the nuances of her response, but somehow, it sounded like she was saying, "Yup."

Thanks to my quality time with Krul, my day was off to a heartwarming start.

"Shall we head back?"

"*Kululululu!*"

We walked back to the cabin together, me with the water jugs hefted on my shoulders and Krul with them slung around her neck. Another snapshot in our quiet day-to-day life.

At home, we finished up breakfast and laundry before sitting down together for our morning huddle.

I kicked the discussion off by declaring, "I'll be forging a sword for Helen today."

"Should the rest of us continue our usual schedule?" Rike asked.

"Yeah. You can shadow me as I work today. Can you make more plate metal with any extra time?"

The five of them chimed in with their agreements.

A new day in Forge Eizo begins.

First order of business—light the firebed and forge using magic. I didn't understand the principles behind the power I was channeling, but at the very least, I didn't have to chant any long incantations.

Magic was more like...a field of particles in the air. By snatching up these particles and compressing them, I could generate heat to light a fire. That was the general idea at least. It worked similarly to adiabatic compression systems. Y'know, the kind where the compression stroke of a piston in a cylinder generates a spark with *pop!*

Without access to magic, I would've had to nurse the fire from hot charcoal or build one completely from scratch. The former was the more preferable of the two, but magic took the cake in terms of simplicity. It was practically as if I were using a lighter.

I wonder how many magic users in this world are like me...people whose powers were limited to sparking a small fire.

Once the flames had spread through the firebed, I inserted a plate of metal to heat. I waited, carefully observing to see when it reached

the perfect malleable temperature, at which point I transferred it to the anvil and hammered the metal to flatten it.

Back when I had forged Helen's first set of swords, I hadn't understood magic, but I knew more about it now. This time, I hammered attentively to ensure that I was properly weaving magic into the structure of the metal. By striking the hot plate, I slowly turned it from a rectangular slab into a proper blade.

Our regular lineup of shortswords was always cast by pouring molten metal into molds. Rike and I would then make final adjustments to the hardened, unmolded blades. However, since I was making a custom model for Helen, I was forging her sword from scratch instead of casting it.

Forged blades were of better quality than cast blades... Well, actually, that wasn't always the case. Both had their own distinct characteristics.

The reason I was *forging* Helen's sword was simply because I could trap more magical essence in the metal this way. Every strike of my hammer changed the shape and imbued the steel with more magic.

The fever-red glow of the scorching metal and the sparkle of the magical particles enthralled me.

Rike sighed wistfully, her eyes glued to my hands. "It's been over a week since I've last seen you work, Boss, and I'm reminded all over again how amazing you are."

But Rike herself had also improved to the point where she could weave magic as she forged. As someone who possessed the dwarves' raw talent for smithing *and* who had learned the elven methods for manipulating magic, she was destined to become a formidable blacksmith in the future.

The longswords and shortswords in our last delivery were all made under Rike's watch. They had been such high quality they were practically good enough to be labeled as Forge Eizo elite model products.

"I looked away for a second, and you've grown so much. I can't afford to be careless either," I told her with a laugh.

"Not at all," she answered. "I still have a ways to go."

Despite what I had said, all my skills came from cheats, so the only way I could improve was by forging new types of weapons to deepen my mastery. From that perspective, Rike had the upper hand; not only was she overflowing with potential, but for her, the sky was the limit.

Mentor of the Legendary Blacksmith Rike has a nice ring to it, huh?

I found myself chuckling unintentionally as I swung my hammer down on the metal.

For entry-level and elite models, the grip and guard pieces of the

blade were part of the mold for the cast, so they came out already formed. When it came to forging a sword, obviously, those separate parts took time to shape.

I sculpted the blade and hilt from one plate, but I made the guard separately from a piece I'd split off a second plate. Of course, I took special pains to weave magic into the guard as well.

I decided on the relative length of the blade and hilt with my cheats—this ensured that, once I put everything together, the sword would be perfectly balanced for Helen's use.

I slid the guard onto the hilt, eased it to the base of the blade, then hammered to tighten it. In the end, it sat snugly against the body of the sword. With this, the overall shaping work was complete.

Helen had been observing my work the entire time. Now, I passed the completed shortsword over to her for inspection. "I haven't wrapped the hilt with leather yet, but give it a few test swings."

"Cool," she said, taking it in hand.

One half of the workshop was designed as a space to serve customers, and because it was more spacious, that was where Helen moved to conduct her test.

Her movements were stilted at first, but gradually, she shed her hesitation and began to swing the sword with vigor. The blade slashed through the air with an audible *swoosh*. She looked as though she were dancing. With her height and slim frame, in another world, she *could* have been a dancer.

The others paused what they were doing to watch Helen. Diana in particular looked on with a focused expression, probably on the hunt for techniques she could use herself.

I won't be surprised if Diana kicks it up a notch during our sparring session tonight.

However, I couldn't continue watching Helen forever. "How does it feel?" I asked.

Helen froze in position with the sword thrust out before her.

"UN. BE. LIEVABLE!!!" she bellowed.

We all twitched in surprise from her volume. The air looked like it was still trembling. A rustle from outside told me that Krul must've gotten a scare too. The noise hadn't escaped Diana's notice, so she dipped outside through the workshop door to check on her.

Helen rushed up to me in one giant leap. "It feels exactly like the last ones you made me!!!" she exclaimed. She instinctively held the sword away from me. As expected of a professional.

"I should hope so," I replied. "I intentionally forged it that way. This new sword should be more durable than your old ones, but there's no way to put it to the test right now."

Right now...and as long as she's here, really.

“Then it really is a perfect replacement. Amazing.”

I nodded. “Should be.”

But actually, it bothered me that the sword was more or less a replica. I’d forged it the same way on purpose, so it wasn’t as if the result was a surprise. However, in order to level up my cheats, wasn’t there anything *more* I could do...?

“I got it!!!” Without meaning to, my shout came out just as loud as Helen’s had been. The others all jerked again. “Sorry, Helen, but I’m going to have to reforge that sword.”

“What? You’re gonna scrap this beauty of a sword?”

I grinned. “Yup.” I’d almost forgotten. I still had *that* waiting in reserve. “I’m going to remake it by combining steel and appoitakara.”

“Appo...popo... What? I’ve never heard of it,” Helen said with a quirk of her head. “Is it different from mithril?”

“Yeah. It’s a rare mineral mined in the north. It’s not widely circulated either, so I’m not surprised that you don’t know about it,” I explained. “I was able to get my hands on some with Camilo’s help.”

Considering her mercenary background and wealth of experience, I expected her to be relatively well-versed in raw materials—if not minerals specifically—but her knowledge didn’t seem to extend to appoitakara.

Maybe *hihirokane*, a metal that gleamed like burning flames, was the more famous of the minerals from the north.

“Appoitakara is light but strong, though I’m not sure how it compares to orichalcum or adamantite. I won’t be forging the sword entirely from it, so the end result might not be dramatically different.”

“But it’ll still be better than this one?”

“Likely so. You shouldn’t feel any noticeable differences when you wield it. The biggest change will be—”

“Go on!” urged Helen.

“—the way it glows,” I finished.

“Come again?”

“Appoitakara radiates a blue light.”

“O-Oh, is that right?”

“There’s not much of a purpose to it though.”

Apparently, the light had an effect against apparitional magical beasts (according to an entry in my installed data), but because such encounters were exceeding rare, the blue luster was only decoration ninety-nine percent of the time.

“So, I’m asking you to be patient a little longer while I remake the sword.”

“That’s fine with me, but...” She paused.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Are you sure? That stuff must be worth a small fortune, right?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a present for one of my family. Besides, half of my motivation is just satisfying my own curiosity.”

“If you say so, then, thanks.”

Helen might not have heard of the mineral before, but she had the good sense to guess that it was pricey. I didn’t know whether she’d suss out that our supply of appoitakara was worth around three gold coins (although we’d only paid two).

“Of course. You’re family,” I said.

I picked up a brand-new knife lying on the counter—the project I had been working on yesterday—and held it out to Helen. “Take this too.”

“Really?”

“Besides Krul, everyone in the family has one,” I told her.

The others all took their own knives from their pockets.

An average guy stumbling in on four people drawing their knives collectively would’ve turned tail to run, but the knife was proof that its holder was a member of this forge.

Helen suddenly sank down to one knee, like a knight awaiting decoration. “It is my great privilege and honor to receive this gift.”

“R-Right...” I stammered.

I was at a loss for words, but Helen only grinned and took the proffered knife with a soft touch. “I’ve had audiences with posh types before. Did I surprise you?”

“That’s putting it lightly,” I replied, knowing that my expression was still one of shock.

I had been taken off guard by the out-of-character behavior, but it was more than that. For a second, I thought she might have realized the secret of her birthright. However, upon further observation, that didn’t seem to be the case. Far be it for me to spill the real reason behind my shock, so I covered it up with a wry smile. “Don’t scare me like that. I just lost a few years off my life.”

“That would be a tragedy! A loss for the entire world, Boss!” Rike exclaimed. “Every single work you bring into this world is meaningful!”

Chuckles and laughter filled the workshop.

As long as we’re a family, we’ll be able to weather any storm. I might not have any proof, but I don’t need it. I just know we’ll be all right.

I went to stand in front of the *kamidana*. I clapped twice to pay my respects before removing the appoitakara that I had stored there.

The metal lived up to its reputation. Considering the size of the bundle, it was shockingly light. If I were going to be using all of it, I would heat it up in the forge, but since I only wanted to break off a piece, I slid it into the firebed instead.

Once it was hot and ready to be worked, I scored a line on its

surface with a chisel. Then, I transferred it to the anvil and began to hammer it. The goal was to bend and break the metal at the seam I had carved.

Though I wasn't holding back my strength, the metal resisted my blows.

I leaned heavily on my cheats. After a considerable amount of time, I finally managed to get the metal to bend the way I wanted it. I flipped it around to bend it back the opposite way. After I repeated the process several times, at last, the metal gave way and cracked apart.

It had been arduous work just to score the appoitakara and break off a piece of the right size. If breaking iron was rated at level one difficulty, appoitakara rated at least level ten. Your average blacksmith wouldn't have been able to do a thing.

Appoitakara's low supply wasn't only because only a small amount of it was mined; it was also because the metal was difficult to work with.

I hadn't even gotten a chance to truly get my hands dirty, but the day was already over.

Right before I fell asleep that night, I suddenly hit on a brilliant idea. "Why don't I just melt it all down in the forge and split it into usable chunks before letting it cool and resolidify?" I mumbled.

But...that was a story for another day.

Chapter 2: Twin Blades of Lightning

The next morning, I went out to the lake for water, washed up, ate breakfast, and then stepped into the workshop. I completed the last part of my morning routine—praying at the *kamidana*—and then settled in to tackle the appoitakara.

This time, instead of making an alloy from appoitakara and steel, my plan was to sandwich the appoitakara between layers of steel. This meant that when I sharpened the blade at the end of the forging process, the steel would be stripped away from the edge to expose the appoitakara...if all went well, that was.

Luckily, my cheats weren't jumping up and clamoring, "No way! Impossible!" so I was optimistic that everything would go smoothly.

I could always start again from scratch if I failed, but I'd be left with a lump of steel and appoitakara. Just thinking about what to do with that metal made my head hurt. I fervently hoped I wouldn't have to deal with it.

The first step was to heat up the piece of appoitakara in the firebed. I leveraged my cheats to determine when the metal hit its forging temperature. Most metals (including the mithril I'd worked with) took on a blazing white color tinged with red once they were good and hot. However, appoitakara gave off a blue glow instead.

Blacksmiths usually used color to estimate the temperature of fire or metal. In that respect, appoitakara's unique properties made that determination difficult, and the number of craftsmen in this world who could work with appoitakara was probably extremely limited. If someone wanted to use it, they needed to learn to read its unique color progression through hands-on experience.

"But there's no questioning how exquisite it is," I found myself mumbling without meaning to.

The flush of blue light across the appoitakara's surface was soft and gentle; it looked as if someone had scooped a slice out of the metal, revealing the color beneath.

Rike stared intently at the radiant blue metal, then added, "But it's beautiful in a way that's different from mithril."

"Yeah, that's right," I said. "It's going to be difficult to remember this coloration."

With my cheats, I would manage. Rike was a different story, but nevertheless, as a dwarf she still had a leg up over humans in regards

to smithing.

"I'll do my best to memorize it," Rike declared. "Opportunities like this are hard to come by."

"I'm rooting for you."

Three gold pieces was far from chump change. With that price, we weren't going to be buying up appoitakara by the boatload. Though, whether we could afford it wasn't exactly the problem. We weren't hurting for money; had it been a matter of the money we had in the bank (metaphorically), we would've made it work. Rather, the price was so ghastly in the first place because of a shortage of supply.

Keeping this in mind, I watched the appoitakara carefully, and once it was at the right temperature, I moved it from the fire to the anvil and began to strike it. The time I had worked with the mithril, the metal had grown more resistant with every bit of magic I'd woven in. I had expected the appoitakara to behave similarly and eventually become a beast to work with, but after a few strikes, I realized that I was wrong.

The appoitakara wasn't growing any harder, which was another aspect that differentiated it from mithril. However, by the way it was starting to take on a phosphorescent luster, I could tell that the metal was absorbing the magic—the glow increased with every strike of my hammer.

In a sense, I was relieved that the metal was behaving, but honestly, it was already extremely resistant to shaping. In fact, this appoitakara had started out harder than the mithril had been *after* I'd fully imbued it with magic. What's more, appoitakara cooled rapidly. A short time out of the fire was all it took for the metal to become too solid to hammer out.

What I was trying to say was, even extending the metal by a minuscule fraction took a Herculean effort...after which I'd have to put it straight back into the fire.

"A knife made fully of appoitakara might be able to fetch us ten gold," I muttered as I waited for the metal to reheat.

Helen countered, "Twenty gold. Easy." She was giving Rike a run for her money in the contest of who could stare at the appoitakara with the most intensity.

"You think?" I asked.

"Yeah. Weapons made of rare metals always go for a high price. On top of that, add in the exceptional quality of your work, and the price is sure to skyrocket. I certainly wouldn't be able to afford it on my wages, but there wouldn't be any shortage of people waiting to snap them up, even at that ridiculous price."

"Good to know. That tidbit will come in handy when I'm pricing things in the future."

At the moment, we were entrusting nearly all of Forge Eizo's inventory to Camilo and leaving the prices up to his judgment. I trusted him not to cheat us out of our money, but it could make our negotiations easier in the future if the forge set the prices for unconventional weapons (like the dual blades I was forging for Helen). The fees we took for special requests were generally up to the commissioner's discretion, but it would still be good to have a ballpark price in mind in case it was tough to settle the discussion otherwise.

Helen's experience as a mercenary meant that she had a grasp of the prices of different goods. *With her help, I should try to familiarize myself with the market landscape a little bit at a time.*

Over the course of the day, I heated and reheated, hammered and rehammered the appoitakara a countless number of times. By evening, I was finally satisfied with the length of the metal strip.

The last thing I did for the day was break the appoitakara strip in half, which was no small feat in and of itself. Thankfully, it was a breeze compared to actually shaping the metal.

Thus concluded day one of forging Helen a new pair of swords.

After my morning chores the next day, I switched to working on the steel layers that would form the outside of the blade surrounding the appoitakara core.

Because of how difficult the appoitakara had been to handle, I was struck with a renewed sense of appreciation for steel. I'd had the same experience after my stint with mithril, but the feeling was even more acute this time. The way steel responded obediently to the direction of the hammer and changed shape exactly the way I wanted was truly a godsend.

The clanging of my hammer echoed rhythmically throughout the workshop. Since today's work was rudimentary—I was only hammering out normal steel—Rike was no longer observing. Helen, too, switched to casting shortswords alongside Diana.

When I checked in on Helen, I found that she was quite adept; just like Diana, she had quickly picked up the techniques. I suppose that since both of them had already been well-versed on the topic of weaponry (albeit from a consumption rather than a production perspective), they had a kind of physical intuition for the process.

"Say," Helen remarked while I was looking at her work.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Did you make my last swords like this? Using these molds?"

"No. I shaped them by hammering out the metal," I explained.

"What's the difference?"

"Aaah, er..." I hesitated a moment but decided to tell her the

truth. "I can weave more magic into the metal by striking it."

"What can't you do, Eizo?"

"Rike can forge with magic too."

Next to us, Rike flexed her biceps and struck a pose, cutting an impressive figure. Contrary to her childlike looks, she was strapped with muscle. Her cuteness factor still overshadowed her tough side, though. Percentage-wise, it was seventy to thirty...in favor of cuteness. Obviously.

"You're not going to regret it?" Helen asked.

"Regret what?" I asked back.

"Telling me."

"It's fine. You're family."

That was right. Helen was already part of the family. Sure, it hadn't even been a week since she'd moved in, but there was no doubt that she was one of us.

I grinned at Helen, who blushed and turned her face down. A woman with Helen's looks should've had at least one or two suitors in the past, but for her to overreact like that... Was it rare for her to have isolated interactions with men?

Diana, who was watching us, interjected, "Aaah, yes, I remember what it was like when I first started living here."

I didn't remember Diana acting this much like an innocent maiden. (Maybe it's because she grew up with several brothers?) I thought she might be massively peeved if I said as much though, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Come on now, back to work," I said, and everyone returned to their individual tasks. I turned my focus back to the steel.

I made four small bars of steel that were slightly thicker than the two layers of appoitakara I'd made yesterday.

I sandwiched one piece of appoitakara between two bars of steel and picked up all three layers with my tongs to insert them into the firebed. Had I been trying to braze steel to steel, I would've had to prepare a layer of filler like borax, but for the time being, I was going to do my best with what I had.

Time to see what happens.

The temperature range for when appoitakara was malleable was narrow, but there was still some overlap with that of steel. I watched the amalgamation of metals like a hawk, waiting for them to hit the limited range when both metals were hot enough to work with.

Another difference between steel and appoitakara I had to account for was their levels of hardness. Steel was softer, so it flattened out more when I hammered it. This was truly a test of a blacksmith's skills—my apologies for undertaking the trial with cheats.

When the metals were thoroughly heated, I removed the layers

from the firebed to hammer. Maybe because there was appoitakara underneath the steel, but the metal felt different than usual when I struck it.

I was able to handle the metals for longer than I had originally anticipated before having to return the block to the fire. Steel was slow to cool compared to other metals. On top of that, the appoitakara also stayed hot for longer today than it had yesterday.

Longer, of course, didn't mean *long*. I did what I could in the time I had. Short as it was, I was still able to imbue the steel fully with magic. The two metals were fusing together nicely even without the use of a filler—a result I owed, as always, to the grace of my cheats.

After lunch, I continued to hammer out the two layered metal blocks until evening rolled around. By the end of the day, I was finally happy with the length. Naturally, I made sure the two long, thin plates were identical twins of each other in both length and weight.

I rapped on the thin slabs with my knuckles. The sound they made was slightly different than that of plain steel...but perhaps that was just my imagination.

Though I still had to fix up the profiles of the swords and sharpen their edges, that was fun I'd reserve for tomorrow. I decided to call it quits for the day.

Day three: I began by heating up one of the layered metal plates in the firebed. The metal gradually rose in temperature until it hit the range where it was malleable. I removed it, set it on the anvil, and hammered it into shape. Since it was already the right length, I was focused on refining the sword's profile.

I shaped the blade so that its cross section was a rough diamond shape. Then, I flattened one point of the sword to form the spine. I tapered the blade to a point starting at around three-quarters down its length.

Opposite the pointed tip, I made a thin pole. Once I forged a grip and guard from steel and attached them, the pole would become the core of the hilt.

The ring of my hammer hitting metal resounded through the workshop. Rike was concentrating on making shortswords instead of observing me. After all, my smithing work for the day didn't deviate much from my usual endeavors and I had already demonstrated how to read the temperature of metal.

The sound of her hammer harmonized with mine. Neither rang like the simple clang of metal on steel but instead sounded musical. We'd been treated to this experience several times in the past, but with the dulcet tones of the appoitakara added into the mix, the melody was especially distinct today.

“It might be because it’s layered with steel, but the appoitakara has a different timbre than the mithril had, doesn’t it?” Rike commented. Lidy nodded in agreement.

Rike had been observing me when I had repaired the mithril blade, a job I had undertaken by Lidy’s request.

“Really?” Helen asked. She hadn’t been there at the time and didn’t know what mithril sounded like when struck.

“It made these pure, clean sounds,” Samya said, reminiscing.

“That’s right,” agreed Diana.

Both of them were familiar with mithril’s musical qualities too.

“Man, wish I’d been there,” Helen remarked, pursing her lips. It was clear that she was disgruntled at being the only person here who was out of the loop. It’d only been a matter of timing though.

“You’ll get another chance one of these days,” I promised as I continued to hammer the sword.

There weren’t many blacksmiths around here who had the skills to forge with mithril. Over in the capital, there would be a handful of craftsmen who should be able to handle the rare metal. However, the only person in these parts who could also incorporate magic into mithril—setting aside any hubris and the fact that I was blessed with cheats—was me.

How could I be sure? Well, simply because there weren’t adequate levels of magic in the city and capital to begin with. Considering that, anyone who was looking to find a blacksmith living in a magic region would likely only find a few.

Of course, I hadn’t chosen to live here because of a prior knowledge of magic.

My point was, there was a high chance that any mithril circulating around the kingdom would eventually make its way to our forge, so Helen should have plenty of opportunities to experience mithril’s music for herself. When an opportunity did roll around, there wasn’t any guarantee that Helen would be here, but I certainly hoped I’d get the chance to show her while she was living with us.

In response to my words, Helen tipped her head minutely before she returned to her own task. I turned back to mine too.

Needless to say, at this point, shaping the appoitakara-layered blades took longer than shaping blades of steel. To my relief (the extra struggle notwithstanding), I was still able to finish the dual blades by the early afternoon.

After that, I forged a grip and handguard out of steel. Since I didn’t have to contend with appoitakara, I finished quickly. Into the base of the grip, I engraved Forge Eizo’s signature logo of the portly cat.

Though I wasn’t positive, I suspected that I’d raised my skills both

in terms of quality and speed. However, since I wasn't the most knowledgeable about the work of other smiths, I showed the swords to Rike.

"What do you think?" I asked. "I think they're pretty decent for two days of work."

"Decent? Anyone would consider these top-class weapons," Rike immediately replied.

The meaning of her words hadn't quite hit, and I asked, "Are you sure you're not exaggerating?"

"There are blacksmiths out there who would give up all hope if they saw these swords and heard how long it took you to forge them."

Looking at Rike's dead serious expression, I gave up any thought of joking around. "As long as you aren't one of them," I said sternly.

"I've always known that you're the best of the best, Boss," she replied. "Even if I can't reach your level, I'm still going to climb as high as I can. I won't spare any effort."

"But make sure you don't push yourself too hard," I cautioned.

God forbid she overwork herself to the point where she collapses. She was still young (admittedly, I wasn't an expert on how dwarves aged), but hopefully she would keep an eye on her future.

Back to the swords—for the next step, I used a chisel to engrave designs on the flats of the blades. I stuck to the lightning bolt motif, similar to how I'd decorated Helen's first pair of swords. My chisel carved deep into the steel to reveal the underlying appoitakara.

The lightning bolts were streaks of blue against the silver steel; the naked edges of the blades and the lightning designs on the flats shined with appoitakara's trademark azure.

This pair of swords was undeniably destined for the hand of the mercenary known as Lightning Strike. May they live up to her reputation.

I installed the grips and guards on the swords and wrapped the hilts with leather, finishing up right before the sun sank below the horizon. By then, Rike and the others were already cleaning up their stations.

When I saw that Helen had a free moment, I held out the dual blades to her.

"Here, I'm done. It's already starting to get dark, but why don't you give them a try? I'll hone and polish the edges later."

Helen hefted the newly forged swords in her hands. "Wha? Whooooaaa!!!" she exclaimed.

Her booming voice reverberated in the forge. I heard a bang on the other side of the door that led outside—Helen had probably given Krul another scare.

"Let's go to the yard," I suggested. "We can calm Krul down, and

you can test the swords.”

“Can I?!” Helen asked.

“Of course.”

I might get commissioned in the future to forge an ornamental sword, but this time I had made Helen’s dual blades strong and ready to stand up to hard use. Though...I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t considered appearance at all when deciding to use *apoitakara*.

Anyway, I had made the blades for a specific person. Surely, there was nothing wrong with having the future owner test them out?

I got up, unlatched the door, and eased it open. Just as I had expected, Krul was waiting outside with a worried expression. I opened the door just wide enough for us to pass through.

“There, there. Big Sis Helen was just a little too enthusiastic in her happiness! Nothing to worry about,” I cooed, stroking Krul’s neck.

“*Kulululu*,” she trilled, settling down slightly.

I said “slightly” because when she saw the others file outside after me, she perked right up. Maybe she thought we were coming out to play with her.

Rike and Lidy stayed to keep Krul company (she was partial to Mama Diana, but she enjoyed spending time with all of us), while Samya, Diana, and I gathered to watch Helen test the swords.

Before Helen began, I warned her, “I haven’t sharpened the edges yet, so be careful not to cut yourself.”

She waved off my warning and walked to the middle of the garden. Making sure she was a safe distance away from me and the others, she began her trial run.

Helen launched into her sequence with a few light swings but rapidly picked up speed until we could hear the sharp sound of the swords whirling through the air. Her movements were elegant, as if she were performing a new style of gymnastics, an impression that was only strengthened by her tall stature and svelte frame.

The dual blades flashed, moving so quickly that they occasionally blurred into one. She had only just picked up the swords moments ago, but she looked as if she’d been wielding them for any number of years.

After she tested out the feel of the swords, she began to flow through a routine that used her entire body. Her every motion was unbelievably fast. I could follow where her movements began somehow, but by the next instant, she would’ve already completed her maneuver.

“Can you tell when she’s about to strike?” I asked Diana and Samya.

Diana answered, “Not at all. I’ve been watching her spar every day since she joined us, but I still can’t tell.”

Diana wasn't able to keep up with Helen during our nightly sparring sessions, which wasn't surprising considering Helen's agility. It had only been a couple of days of practice though.

Helen threw her full body into her attacks, looking as though she were dancing. She gradually increased the variety of her movements. Sometimes she moved like flowing water, sometimes like a wild tempest.

The blue glow of the appoitakara trailed her movements, evoking the image of a storm cloud laced with lightning. Back in my previous world, there'd been a term from a certain popular movie about a legendary floating city, and it perfectly fit the scene I was staring at: dragon's nest.

Helen's speed built and built, and her ring of motion grew ever wider, until finally...

"Haaa!!!" she cried as she reached her peak. In one burst of motion, she flew forward several meters, twin tails of electric blue light streaking behind her. True to her nickname, it was like witnessing a lightning strike.

The blades may have still been dull, but the last attack would've been able to split a boulder clean in two regardless.

She froze, panting, with her swords still extended. In this weather, I felt like I could almost see steam rising off of her.

Once she'd gotten a moment to recover, I called out to her. "How do they hold up?" From her performance, the blades should've at least surpassed the average sword, but it didn't hurt to ask.

She caught her breath and spun around to face us, an intense energy pouring off of her in waves. Samya, Diana, and I all shrunk back. She took a step toward us...but changed her mind and paused to set the swords carefully down on the ground, one on each side of her.

In the next second, she leaped. She had crouched to put down the swords, which was the perfect stance from which to dash forward. I froze in surprise, and Helen tackled me with gusto and squeezed me tightly. Given our height difference, her arms came to wrap perfectly around my chest.

"They're perfect! I just knew you were the best, Eizo!!!"

"Ow ow ow ow!" I protested. I was trapped, unable to move a single muscle. "Show a man some mercy!!!"

Wow, it hurts just to breathe!

"Now I know why they call you Lightning Strike," Samya said calmly, ignoring my plight, and Diana rushed forward in a panic to save me from Helen's clutches.

In the end, it took the combined power of Diana, Samya, and Rike to peel Helen off of me. It had been impossible for Diana alone.

Lidy, whose specialty wasn't physical strength, hadn't joined the fray. She had a type of slumber magic in her arsenal, but she had told me before that the magic only enhanced the target's existing drowsiness, so it might have been completely ineffective against someone who was already worked up.

Krul didn't lend a hand either. She was powerful enough to rival the strength of one or two horses, so if her help *had* been necessary, then Helen would've been some kind of superhuman... My ribs and spine would've been in serious danger.

The crushing hug had been bad enough. I swore I'd heard my bones creak.

"Th-Thanks," I said to the others when I was finally free.

I had a sense of déjà vu. This had happened before, back when I'd forged Helen's first set of dual blades. Or...had it been when I'd repaired them? Well, it had been less than a year since I'd been whisked away to this world—it couldn't have happened that long ago, and yet it felt like it had been forever.

Helen wilted. "M-My bad, Eizo..."

Considering everything she'd been through, I couldn't blame her for getting overly excited at the first good thing to have happened to her in a while.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it," I assured her. "I'm just happy you're happy."

Helen nodded, brightening slightly. "Okay."

During our morning huddle the next day, I suggested to everyone, "Why don't we take a break tomorrow? We'll finish up our work today and spend tomorrow in the forest. There's no need to worry about us running out of meat, right?"

Samya was the first to jump on board. "Good idea."

"I agree," added Diana. "It's nice to explore the forest without having to hunt once in a while."

Lidy nodded enthusiastically as well, and Rike didn't seem particularly opposed.

"Can I go too?" Helen asked with a touch of uncertainty.

I answered without hesitation. "Of course."

As a mercenary, Helen would've lived a nomadic lifestyle. It had probably been a while since she'd last had a steady, peaceful routine, so I figured she must have felt a little lost.

"It's decided then," I declared. "Oh, and we can't forget about Krul either. We can do some harvesting along the way if we find any medicinal herbs or fruit."

"Yes, please," Lidy said. "Fruits are one thing, but herbs haven't been so easy to come by."

“All right then, we’ll follow you and explore the areas you’re interested in, Lidy. Of course, there’s no need to go all out. The point is for us to take a break, after all.”

Lidy nodded firmly. The others agreed as well.

At that, we wrapped up the discussion and started our day.

I had finished forging the bodies of the shortswords yesterday, so my job today consisted of finishing touches. After that, I planned to spend the extra time forging knives.

Thanks to Rike, we had plenty of entry-model knives in our inventory (granted, her work was soon going to be good enough to produce elite models). I calculated that I should be able to make enough elite model knives by the end of the day to fulfill our next standing delivery...or at least enough that Camilo wouldn’t have any complaints.

Unlike in my previous world, I could work at my own pace without much stress. The fact that such a simple luxury—like taking a day off—could make me feel so giddy was no doubt because my time working at a black company had left marks on my soul.

These little musings over my situation made my hammer feel lighter than usual. Both the work on the swords and the knives felt like a breeze.

“Someone’s in a cheery mood,” Rike teased.

But I didn’t mind. I knew she was only poking fun. “Am I that obvious? I’m just looking forward to tomorrow.”

“Yeah? I thought there might have been some other reason.”

“Such as?”

“Well, haven’t you gotten faster?” commented Rike.

“You think?” I asked, taken aback.

Now that she mentioned it, it was still early in the day, but I had made great progress. However, it was hard to say for sure that I’d improved—I could’ve been working faster since I was feeling upbeat. Still, it was worth testing my speed again another day.

Rike was forging knives, while the others replenished our supply of plate metal.

We’re not on vacation just yet, but these kinds of days are peaceful in their own way, I thought as I watched over the gaiety and merriment.

And so, another quiet day at Forge Eizo came to an end.

Chapter 3: Picnic Time

The next day, after finishing our morning chores, we prepared for our outing. For lunch, I packed our usual: sweet and salty stewed boar meat sandwiched in flatbread, which was my version of a Taiwanese pork belly burger.

If only I could get my hands on chicken eggs... I'd be able to expand our menu. But then again, who knew whether the eggs in this world were safe to eat? Even on Earth, there was some risk involved in eating runny eggs—salmonella sometimes lurked in raw egg, but it could be killed by heating them above seventy degrees celsius. As long as there was a similar method to deal with the bacterial species here, I would like to try making some egg dishes. Alas, at the moment, there was no use pining over what I didn't have.

After I prepared the sandwiches, I filled our water pouches with mint tea. Then, I packed everything into one bag. Since we would be spending all day in the forest, we changed into clothing that would be easy to move around in.

Just to be safe, Helen and I strapped on our shortswords, Rike brought a spear, and the other three shouldered their bows. Armed as we were, I figured that we should be fine even if we did encounter a bit of danger. Our party's combat specs were pretty high too...

"Shall we get going?" I asked everyone, and I received a chorus of "yes!" in return.

We filed from the cabin. I checked to see that we were all outside before shutting and locking the door.

Krul was waiting for us, shifting restlessly. I'd let her in on the plan yesterday, but it was a toss-up as to whether she had actually understood me or whether she had just guessed what we were doing after seeing the others.

Either way, she's one clever girl. Apparently, I was also a bit of a doting parent.

I gave Krul the bag containing our food and miscellaneous supplies so she could carry it. We weren't taking the mini cart since it made a racket, and I was unsure how much abuse it could take. In times like these, Krul carried things around her neck, and I tied the bag to her with a length of rope.

Six portions of food and water (or in this case, tea) should have been heavy, but Krul didn't seem bothered by the burden.

“Thanks for carrying everything Krul,” Diana said. “We’re counting on you.”

Krul replied with a cheerful, “*Kuluuuu.*”

The seven of us—six people and one drake—set off into the forest. Sunbeams shone through gaps in the foliage like spotlights. I was glad for the pleasant weather.

Speaking of weather...

“Is the rainy season starting soon?” I asked.

“I think so. From what I can tell, it’s gonna start around the week after next. Definitely no later than a month,” Samya answered. “It’s gonna be a long one, I think.”

I knew I could trust her assessment, seeing as she’d lived here all her life (as far as I knew).

“Hmmm, maybe we should pause our deliveries when the rains come,” I mused.

We could always buy canvas on our next trip into the city and make a canopy for the carriage. However, there was a problem with that plan: Krul would be left exposed to the rain. The best we could do was sew her a raincoat, but that wouldn’t help much.

We had a big enough nest egg that we didn’t have to scrape to save money. As long as we weren’t causing Camilo any inconvenience, I’d prefer to avoid long-distance trips during the rainy season, even if they were just to the city.

“That would probably be for the best,” Diana agreed.

“We have enough raw materials, food, and supplies as well,” added Rike.

“Then, it’s decided,” I stated. That was my preferred outcome too. I didn’t know whether Camilo would protest...but, well, I was sure it’d work out one way or the other.

We had been meandering through the woods for around an hour when Lidy exclaimed, “My!” and dashed forward excitedly.

The rest of us rushed to follow her. We caught up a little ways ahead and found Lidy crouching down and rooting through a patch of earth overgrown with ivy.

“Did something catch your eye?” I asked.

Lidy nodded and showed me what she had foraged. “This is an extremely valuable species of mushroom.”

Even though it was early in the day, the mushroom she was holding out emitted a faint phosphorescent glow. In my previous world, there was a type of mushroom called the moonlight mushroom, but its glow was too faint to be seen in the daylight. If this mushroom was luminescent enough to be seen when it was light out, how bright must it be at night?

“It can be boiled and drunk like a tea, and it’s effective against

various kinds of illnesses. You have to dry it out first though,” Lidy explained.

“Really?” I asked. “Handy.” She nodded again.

Now I understood why she’d been in such a rush to dig it up. It was too good of a commodity to pass up. Harvesting mushrooms as an amateur often spelled disaster, but Lidy was an elf and a longtime forest dweller, so there was no way she would make a mistake, right?

Right...?

Samya pursed her lips. “I’ve never heard of it before.” The fact that there was a species she didn’t know must have hurt her pride as a beastfolk of the Black Forest.

“They’re parasites of this particular species of ivy, and they only sprout right before the rainy season,” said Lidy. “They dissolve when they get wet.”



What people usually thought of as mushrooms were actually just the fruiting bodies of the fungi, which were analogous to the flowers and fruits of plants. The fungal equivalent of a plant's stem and roots was the mycelium, which formed a vast network beneath the earth. The mycelium of the mushroom Lidy had found probably invaded the vines of the ivy to take its nutrients directly from the plant.

Though, that was assuming that mushrooms here were similar organisms to the ones in the world I'd left behind.

"You elves are as smart as rumored," Helen praised.

Helen's frankness didn't seem to bother Lidy, but she shrunk in on herself in embarrassment at being complimented.

It turned out that the mushroom was as rare as Lidy had claimed—we scoured the area, but in the end, we didn't find any more of them.

Regardless, finding even *one* was a lucky break. We wouldn't have to worry as much about anyone falling deathly ill since, apparently, it could help treat a variety of illnesses. Living in the middle of the forest as we did, an emergency could become serious because any help would likely arrive too late...

At present, the medical systems in this world couldn't compare to that of the technology back on Earth. Having the appropriate medicines on hand could make all the difference.

I suddenly remembered another question I had about illnesses, and I asked the group, "Is there any healing magic?"

Detailed information about magic hadn't come with my installed data. Previously, I had witnessed Lidy fighting a hobgoblin using magic, but to this day, I still didn't know exactly what spells she had used.

As our resident magic expert, Lidy replied, "There is. A fair number of people can perform the basic spells."

"Basic like...healing a fever?"

"That's right. Even I can heal headaches and low-grade fevers."

"Seriously?!" I exclaimed.

Lidy nodded.

In my previous life, I'd often suffered from tension headaches (an occupational hazard of desk work along with stiff shoulders). I was deeply jealous that she had such a useful skill.

"My powers are limited though..." she continued.

Lidy couldn't heal serious ailments by herself. That was when the mushroom and other medicinal herbs came in handy. In other words, after magic came medicine.

"There are healers in the capital who can treat headaches and stomachaches," Diana added, "but their fees are expensive."

As befitting the capital city.

"How expensive?" I asked.

"For a headache? Maybe one gold?"

I let out a wry laugh. "Yup, that'll cost you."

That was more than we got per delivery run. The price was possibly worth it for a really severe headache, but you wouldn't call that kind of healer on the regular. It was prohibitively expensive, even for nobles with in-residence healers.

"And that's why normally you would use an herb or something," Diana concluded.

"Makes perfect sense."

Almost immediately after coming to this world, I had been able to find some fever-relieving herbs. If effective herbs were so readily available, then they were doubtlessly the cheaper treatment option.

It seemed that healers in this world were a hybrid of magicians and herbalists.

"O-Over there," Lidy blurted before darting off again. Her target this time wasn't some sort of fungus growing next to ivy, but a patch of leafy plants. "This herb is effective against stomachaches," she said, plucking the leaves carefully.

The herb she showed me was faintly red. I hadn't seen any around the cabin.

It was worth roaming farther out today.

"Can we grow it in our garden?" I asked.

"I believe so," she answered.

"Then, shall we bring back two bunches?"

"Yes," she said with a tiny nod.

I took out some old cloth and twine from the sack with our miscellaneous goods. It was only an herb, but I would still feel sorry if we didn't carry it home with the proper care.

Rike, Samya, Helen, and I used our knives to dig up the plants. We then wrapped them up gently with the cloth, secured the bundles with twine, and hung them around Krul's neck.

"The spoils of war," I said.

"*Kuuu*," Krul replied, wriggling happily.

I briefly worried that she would drop the herbs, but my fears were unfounded. Her shaking didn't make the bundles come apart nor did any of the dirt fall out. In that case, I figured that I shouldn't have to worry about herbs going missing while we weren't paying attention, even once Krul started walking.

The two holes where we had dug out the herbs were like natural traps. An animal in a hurry (or beastfolk or human) could very well trip over them, so we refilled them just in case. I wouldn't have been able to sleep easy otherwise.

We continued our leisurely walk through the forest to the sound of birdsong and the rustle of the wind, chatting away about silly things. It felt like we were going on a picnic or on an adventure, an atmosphere that stirred the embers of my macho side.

Needless to say, our reality was far from idyllic; we were strolling through dangerous territory.

But we had Samya, who was a veteran huntress of this forest, Lidy, who had a broad grasp over the flora of this world, and Helen, who was the powerhouse of our offense. I was no slouch on the battlefield either. Thus, we were lured into a false sense of security.

That's right.

False.

All of a sudden, Samya stopped dead in her tracks, her expression wary. *Did she notice the enervated atmosphere or sense that our relaxing had raised the proverbial flag?*

Krul came to a standstill as well, twisting her head this way and that. The fact that both of them had stopped simultaneously with matching expressions of wariness was a sign that something dangerous was heading our way.

The others immediately picked up on the tense atmosphere. We all quickly raised and readied our weapons.

The pupils of Samya's golden eyes had shrunk to points, which was proof of her apprehension. She nocked an arrow as she bit out, "There's a black bear heading our way. Sorry I didn't notice sooner, Eizo. We're upwind of it."



If Samya hadn't noticed that our unwanted visitor wasn't human, then no one else would have either, and that was exactly why she was apologizing.

"Don't worry about it," I responded, leaving it at that.

Krul had turned in the same direction that Samya was facing.

"You sense it too, don't you, girl?" I asked her.

"*Kyuuu*," she whined, uncharacteristically nervous.

Worst comes to worst, I'll get her to run away by herself. Drakes lived off magical energy, so she would be fine in this forest.

"Should we shoot it from here?" Samya suggested.

"No, it's hiding in the thickets," I answered. "Best not."

There was little undergrowth where we were situated, but low bushes grew in the direction where Samya and Krul were looking which made it hard to see.

Helen and I took the vanguard. Rike followed behind us with her spear. Diana, Lidy, and Samya made up the rear.

"Do you think we can take it down ourselves?" I asked Helen.

"I've never fought a bear before," she replied.

"I have," I said.

Her voice was tinged with exasperation. "You don't say..."

Last time, I had been wielding a spear; this time, I was only armed with a shortsword. I regretted not bringing the longsword.

I considered switching weapons with Rike, but I had given her the spear to compensate for her short reach. Taking it from her would defeat that purpose.

A rustling came from the direction of the bushes, and I caught a whiff of the characteristic stink that clung to wild beasts. The air smelled like blood.

I might have only been able to pick up a trace of the bear's presence, but Samya's senses must've been going haywire.

Unfortunately, I couldn't turn around to look at her expression.

Our tension bled into the surroundings. For a moment, the forest seemed to fall completely silent. From the birds to the insects, every living thing was holding its breath. It was as if time had stopped.

Then, a hulking mass leaped out of the thicket.

I thought it was going to attack, but it only raised itself on its hind legs, glaring down at us, likely in an attempt to intimidate us.

There was no chance that Helen and I were going to let its moment of stillness pass us by. We hadn't discussed our game plan beforehand, but we split up seamlessly to flank it.

The bear floundered for a second, but it immediately recovered and targeted me, who had come up on its right. Was that its dominant side? It swiped at me with a giant paw.

My last confrontation with a bear popped into my mind, but I chased those thoughts away to focus on dodging the attack and killing the beast in front of me.

In the heartbeat that I was engaged with the bear, Helen closed the distance. She brandished her dual blades and, with a grunt, brought them down on the bear. Like when she had tested out the swords, twin streaks of blue lightning trailed her movements.

Following the flash of lightning, the bear's left arm fell to the ground. In an impressive demonstration of her prowess, Helen had cut it off in one clean stroke.

"GROOOAAARRR!" the bear bellowed.

It would've been ideal if it had turned tail to flee, but its eyes burned with rage. It whirled around to Helen with a speed that didn't match its hulking body.

But before it could do anything, three arrows sank into its flesh. All three were fitted with my custom model arrowheads. The arrows, which not even metal armor should've been able to stop, pierced the bear's hide with ease.

The bear roared again and spun to face the direction the arrows had come from.

A second burst of blue streaked through the air. Like bolts of lightning, Helen's shortswords sliced through the bear's neck.

A moment later, the headless body of the bear swayed and crashed to the ground.

Chapter 4: Family Member No. 8

Helen and I approached the bear's prone body. Rike took a few steps forward but stopped a short distance away.

The chances of it getting back up were slim to none—not even a magical beast could withstand a beheading, surely—but it was always best to be absolutely certain it was dead.

The other three kept an eye on our surroundings. It'd be foolish to drop our guard and give a different animal an opening to attack. The seconds ticked by as we watched the bear for any sign of movement. When it remained motionless, as we'd expected it to, we relaxed out of our battle stances.

"Anyone hurt?" I asked. Thankfully, everyone reported that they were uninjured.

After all, Helen *had* made short work of the bear; the battle had been over in an instant. I was still in good shape too—other than the tumble I'd taken dodging the bear's attack, I had been mostly unaffected. I glanced around the group. After seeing that no one looked blood-splattered, I was finally able to switch from high-alert mode back to normal.

The fight had lasted barely a minute, but all of a sudden, I felt weak from the rush of adrenaline. I sat down right where I was, not resisting the pull of exhaustion.

"Was it corrupted?" I asked.

"I didn't feel any stagnant magical energy," Lidy answered.

In that case, it had most likely been a regular animal.

"Black bears are known to be aggressive when they're hungry," Samya explained. "They'll take down every bit of prey they come across, one after another."

I'd heard of spiders with such behavioral traits, but I couldn't think of any mammals with similar habits. However, the Black Forest was teeming with animals that could be prey for bears. The bears might have adopted such a hunting style because of the overabundance of food.

"What about the ones they kill but don't eat?"

"They'll leave the corpse behind...or, well, if their luck holds and they wander back around right as they're getting hungry again, they'll eat it then."

The bears in the forest killed first and ate later—they abandoned

leftovers to the wolves, and other scavengers likely took care of anything else the bears couldn't eat. If no one consumed the remains, they would decay and become a source of nutrients for the forest.

I felt a sudden appreciation for the efficient but brutal workings of the ecosystem.

"Eizo." Samya calling my name snapped me out of my thoughts. She sounded anxious.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We should go take a look at what it killed."

When the bear had first appeared, it'd smelled faintly of blood, though the scent had since faded. If that blood hadn't belonged to the bear, then it must have been from the bear's prey. Samya thought we should check, so that's what we would do. It didn't matter whether we were looking for a deer or a rabbit.

As for the bear's corpse, we unanimously decided to leave it behind and let nature take its course.

We *could* butcher it for meat, but we were now in a different situation than we'd been in the last time I'd killed a bear. Back then, I had deliberately tracked down the bear with the intention of slaying it, so eating its meat had been a way for us to honor its life. This time, we had run into one by coincidence. Simply put, the bear and our household had come into the battle on equal footing (the difference in numbers notwithstanding).

I hoisted myself up with a groan, digging my butt out from where it felt like it had rooted into the ground. As a group, we headed in the direction Samya pointed us in.

We were walking slowly, but we hadn't gone very far when Samya stopped.

"Here?" I asked.

Samya nodded wordlessly.

I signaled that everyone should spread out and search. Though, quite frankly, aside from Samya and Krul, none of us had any heightened senses of smell. Lidy was the only one who might've had a better chance of noticing something out of the ordinary given her wealth of knowledge about forests.

I bet Samya's going to find our quarry faster than any of the rest of us.

And just as I predicted, I soon heard Samya hollering for us. We rushed over to where she was waiting near the bodies—no, the body—of a majestic and large adult wolf. Its torso had been shredded, and it wasn't moving, so it was likely already dead.

I shot a quick look at Samya, but she shook her head. There was nothing we could do to save it.

However, the dead wolf wasn't alone. There was a second, considerably smaller wolf—it was still a young pup.

The pup could've been a "he" or a "she," but I couldn't tell. In any case, it was barking menacingly at us. Had the large wolf shielded this pup at the cost of its own life?

"Is this rascal the one you were talking about earlier?" I asked, and Samya nodded.

An orphaned pup in the wild...

The smell of blood could attract other animals. Even if the next animal to come by was another wolf, there was no guarantee it would take in a pup from another pack. And, if the next animal was a different species entirely, well, there was no need to speculate what fate was bound to befall the young wolf.

Now that we had found this pup, I couldn't stand by and watch its tiny soul be extinguished. I didn't think I'd be able to just ignore it.

I glanced around at the others. They all wore the same look of expectation.

"All right, all right," I conceded with a sigh. "We'll take it in."

The first hurdle was how to bring the wolf safely home with us. I mulled over the problem.

All the while, the wolf pup continued to yap at us. Its barks sounded like that of a normal puppy. I thought that the barking could attract the attention of other predators, which would put not just us, but also the pup, in danger.

We have to shut it up somehow.



“Do you think it’ll follow us if we give it some food?” I whispered. It would be ideal if such a simple tactic would work. If only...

“Uh...probably,” Samya replied, keeping her voice low as well.

Seriously? Darn. We should’ve cut off a piece of meat from the bear while we had the chance.

Seeing no other choice, I opened the lunch sack that hung from Krul’s neck and pulled the meat filling out of one of the pork sandwiches. It wasn’t good for the pup’s health, but what else could I do?

I inched toward the pup. It drew back slightly and continued to snarl at me. However, once I got close, it finally fell quiet and started sniffing the air, its nose twitching. I was relieved that it had stopped barking.

I slowly placed the meat onto the ground and then backed away so that it was out of reach. I crouched down to wait. The pup continued sniffing at the meat as it toddled over hesitantly.

When it was finally in front of the meat, it took one last big whiff before it started chowing down with relish. The sight of a pup (or any kind of young animal really) scarfing down its food was cute to see.

I was made doubly aware of how adorable the pup was by the barrage of attacks to my shoulder—a flurry of swift strikes was rapidly draining my shoulder’s HP.

I have eyes, you know! Believe me, the pup’s cuteness has not escaped me, so Diana, can you stop hitting me?!

The pup finished its meal in a flash and then switched its attention back to us. We stared back at it patiently, staying still. Soon, taking faltering steps, it began to pad closer to us.

It came within reach and then plopped down on its haunches. Once seated, it didn’t look like it was planning to come any closer.

Aaah, well, good enough.

I slowly but purposefully stretched a hand out.

If the pup had a disease like rabies and ended up biting me, that would spell the end of the line. The stakes of this gamble were high; I was playing with only one chip, and that chip was my life.

The pup sniffed my hand.

Stage one: clear.

It smelled me for a while before its tail started to wag. I took that as a good sign and reached my hand toward its head, taking my time, and gave it a scratch. It didn’t flinch away or run but instead looked like it was enjoying itself.

“Aren’t you a good little pup? Will you come home with us?” I asked, looking into its eyes.

The pup stared at me, but it took a step back. It swiveled to look

at the body of the other wolf. It must've been at least dimly aware that its parent was dead, but even so...

A few minutes passed. The pup kept twisting to look between me and the corpse of the wolf, but in the end, it started wagging its tail again and barked out a bright, "Yip!"

At that, I reached down and picked up the pup carefully. It didn't resist.

We decided to take this opportunity and head straight home, however, we hesitated over what to do with the body of the older wolf. After talking it over, we agreed to give it a simple burial. We hadn't brought any tools with us, so we couldn't bury it very deep; something might dig up its grave eventually, but we did the best we could. We planted a branch in the mound of dirt over the grave as a modest headstone. As a family, we put our hands together, prayed for it to rest in peace, and promised to raise the pup with love and care.

We walked faster than usual on our way back. Naturally, our picnic plans were put on hold.

I handed the wolf pup over to Diana, who was radiating eagerness. In her arms, the pup swiveled its head this way and that, sniffing at the air. Maybe it was excited to be held so high up.

There was no sign of it wanting to run—it looked perfectly comfortable snuggled up to Diana.

Watching the wolf bond with Diana, I commented, "It sure got attached to us quick."

Samya, who was walking next to Diana, responded, "It knows that its parent is gone, and it probably only stayed nearby because it didn't know what else to do." Her nose was twitching just like the pup's, and I knew she was checking to see if she could smell any threats.

"And we strolled in and fed it, so it decided that we're safe, right?"

Samya nodded.

"I assumed they were part of a pack," I continued, "but the two of them were alone. Could they have strayed from the pack?"

The last wolves we'd seen had also been a parent-child pair, but surely their siblings and family had been waiting nearby. Even if the wolves had gotten separated from the pack for a short time, I couldn't imagine they would wander away completely.

Samya shook her head.

Does that mean they didn't lose their pack?

"Baby wolves born around this season are smaller. I don't know what happened in this case, but usually, those pups will be abandoned by the mother."

"And this one wasn't?"

Samya nodded firmly. "I don't know why. I wouldn't be surprised

if they were chased out by the other wolves. After all, one weak wolf endangers the entire pack. These guys must've run into the bear while they were wandering around the forest. Wolves have excellent noses, so they should've been able to smell the bear coming. The fact that they didn't means that the mother must've been absolutely exhausted..."

"This is just speculation, since we didn't see anything, but maybe they tried to steal the bear's food."

"Maybe."

Well, regardless, the pup wasn't going to be a burden on our family, and it would have a battery of strong, reliable older sisters. Welcoming a new life always came with a host of responsibilities, and for the sake of this little one, we would be able to shoulder them at least until it fully grew up.

I mused on our future while watching the pup, who was happily licking Diana's cheek.

The whole way back, we stayed vigilant, and our group returned to the cabin without encountering any trouble.

Diana was reluctant to part with the young wolf, but at my behest she set it down on the ground. Immediately, it zoomed off to explore its new surroundings.

"Don't go running off somewhere we can't see you!" I yelled.

The pup was doing a convincing imitation of those spinning fireworks, the ones that whizzed erratically on the ground once lit. It paused for just a moment to look at me. "*Yap!*" it barked before running off again.

I relieved Krul of the bags, and she ambled off toward the pup (to keep an eye on it, I assumed).

Out of all the "big sisters" in the family, Krul was closest to the pup's age. If we were counting in terms of household tenure, Helen had joined most recently, but she was likely older than Krul.

Between Krul and Samya, I thought that Samya was probably still older but not by much. She was five human years old, though older in beastfolk years; my guess was that Krul was younger. I didn't know anything about how drakes aged though, so I was relying on intuition. For all I knew, she could be 180 years old or something... That wasn't so far-fetched, was it?

Regardless, the wolf pup was undoubtedly the youngest, and so long as that was the case, then it was safe to call Krul the older sister. "Take care of the pup, Big Sis," I told Krul. She cooed in response and continued onward to where the little wolf was frolicking.

Diana started to inch her way over there too, but she stopped when I cleared my throat meaningfully.

Phew! At least she hasn't taken complete leave of her senses.

I put away the goods Krul had been carrying for us, leaving the precious mushroom and medicinal herbs out to dry. Then I took the opportunity to slice off some pieces of dried jerky—we could use that as chow for the newest member of the family.

We had a small discussion, and everyone decided that we'd go to the garden together and eat the picnic lunch I'd packed. Since we were home, I warmed up the mint tea and boiled the jerky to soften it.

Wolves needed soft food for some time after birth... But for how long? I wasn't sure, but I figured that the pup was still too young to chew anything with too much bite, which was why I was trying to make the meat more tender. Going forward, we could set aside a larger portion of raw meat from our hunting spoils as meals for the wolf.

I spread out a large piece of cloth to use as a picnic blanket and set down the meat for the wolf, the sandwiches, and the tea.

Soon, the wolf pup stopped playing with Krul and turned to look my way. Maybe it had smelled the meat, or maybe it had guessed that it was time to eat after seeing me prepare the meal. At least that saved me the trouble of getting its attention.

We all gathered and sat on the blanket. The pup came to heel at Diana's side. When I set the unseasoned, boiled-tender meat in front of it, the pup immediately began chowing down. I let it go without comment since it was probably still too young to learn commands like "wait."

Besides Krul and the wolf pup, we all said *itadakimasu* and dug in. Krul laid down next to the sheet since she wasn't one to eat much anyway.

Watching the wolf gobble up the meat, I said, "We have to give this kid a name."

"Don't you have any suggestions, Eizo?" Diana asked.

"No, well, I..." I timidly trailed off.

But then Samya cut in and outed me. "Eizo has absolutely zero sense when it comes to names," she remarked glibly.

I buried my face in my hands.

"Boss..." Rike said in a compassionate tone.

"I wasn't aware..." Lidy said in an equally kind voice.

I shrunk further in on myself.

"Now you know," Samya said, moving the conversation along. "We'd better decide among ourselves."

I brought my hands down. "Is the pup a boy or girl?" I asked.

Diana picked up the wolf—it had already demolished its meal—and flipped it over. Samya peeked over from beside her.

"An innie, not an outie," Samya said.

“It’s a girl,” Diana announced.

Another girl? *I could really use a guy around the house, sooner rather than later. It’s best that I put some thought into the problem too...though there is a saying about how no ideas are better than incompetent ones.*

The others all put their heads together. Then, Lidy spoke softly. “Lucy.”

Lucy, eh?

“It’s cute,” I said. “And it fits, right?” No flattery—that was what I truly thought.

Samya, Diana, Rike, and Helen had no objections either.

Diana set the pup down and said, “Your name is going to be Lucy, okay?”

“Arf!” she barked.

Though the little wolf had become family the moment we found her, we officially welcomed Lucy into the household for the second time.

Lucy looked like she couldn’t sit still any longer, so I reminded her, “Stay where we can see you!” and sent her on her way. She barked back a spirited reply and dashed off.

Krul had been dozing, but when she noticed that Lucy had run off to play, she leisurely rose to her feet and followed after.

Lucy obeyed our instructions and stayed within sight. She likely also understood that it was dangerous for people (err, wolves?) to stray too far from us.

Lunch was made all the more merry by the sight of Lucy scampering around the garden, and we took our time eating. Samya and I lay down after finishing our meal while the others stayed sitting. I felt like one of those cosmopolitan families who did things like lounge together in parks.

“Hmmm, should we build a doghouse for Lucy?” I mused.

There were no problems putting her up in the cabin or Krul’s hut, but it might be good to build her a proper wolfhouse. It was your quintessential DIY project.

“She won’t need one, right?” That opinion was voiced by Diana. She probably wanted Lucy to stay in the house with us.

“Do nobles keep their hunting dogs in the house?” I asked.

“No...? The Eimoors don’t own any, but the ones who do keep several dogs—one or two isn’t enough—so they usually have a separate kennel and keepers,” Diana explained.

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

Aristocrats often hunted along mountainous terrain and in spacious fields, which were areas too big for two dogs to cover. Obviously, no one less than a dedicated master of hounds would be able to take care of a large number of dogs, and the related costs of

raising them would have to come from the family's coffers. There were hardships to being born a noble too...

"And beastfolk...?" I wondered. "I suppose you all share the same den?"

"Yeah, since we move around sometimes," Samya replied.

"That's what I thought."

Samya—or rather, beastfolk in general—didn't always stay in the same den. It wouldn't make sense for them to build a new hut for their pets every time they moved, so pets most likely lived together with the family.

"What about dwarves?"

"Some forges raise dogs...but primarily as guards. We would usually build a doghouse outdoors," Rike said, giving what I considered to be a dwarf-like answer.

"A doghouse must be a piece of cake for dwarves."

"Yes, that's definitely an advantage."

Dwarves built their own expansions for their forges, so naturally, they'd be able to build a doghouse in no time at all.

"And elves—"

"Dogs are akin to community property in our villages," Lidy explained, jumping in preemptively. "Since my kind usually lives in the forest, we don't often bother with doghouses. Any hounds or wolves are free to stay where they like. We don't raise them so much as we...cohabitate with them, I suppose."

"I see."

So elves simply shared their villages with their canine friends. It'd been a while since the last time the customs of the elves in this world had aligned with my stereotypes about them from Earth.

"I'm guessing it's hard to keep a dog while living as a mercenary?" I asked Helen.

"You hardly see anybody with one. They exist, but they're rare. Inns don't let dogs in, so unless you can put up with camping all the time, it's just not possible."

On the other hand, that meant some people were willing to endure camping out for the sake of a dog. There was no limit to the love between a person and their pet.

We continued the chatter along this vein and eventually concluded that we would neither build a house for Lucy nor tie her up.

Diana had said that it might be better to keep Lucy leashed since she was still a pup, but she *was* well-behaved—I'd been watching her all this time. Even without Krul's guidance, she never strayed outside our field of vision. So, as long as she played where we could watch her, we wouldn't need to worry.

The other reason for not leashing her, which applied to Krul too, was that I wanted to make sure she could run away in an emergency.

If Lucy wanted to return to the wild, I would support her (although Diana might be opposed). I had no problems with her leaving when she decided the time was right. My gut instinct was that she wouldn't choose to go back to the forest, but I would leave that decision up to her—she could do what she wanted when she was all grown up, never mind that she was a wolf and not a child.

And so, we spent our time leisurely. At one point, Lucy's battery ran out of juice and she curled up next to Krul to nap and recharge (on the flip side, my shoulder's HP was once again rapidly drained).

Watching over the peaceful duo, a thought struck me. I turned to the others and declared, "I need to make myself a weapon. If ever a calamity were to befall us, we could abandon the house...but I need something to protect myself and, more importantly, all of you. We've got another kid to think about now."

During Helen's rescue mission, we had snuck into the empire, so discretion had been key. I hadn't planned to bring anything flashy, but since Camilo had asked, I'd brought my personal weapons with me.

A weapon that would be effective in a situation like a surprise bear attack (the one earlier, for example) would come in handy.

Rike piped up eagerly, "You want to prioritize reach, then?" She was excited to talk about weapons.

"Anything too long will be difficult to carry," I pointed out, "so long-shafted weapons are out of the question."

"That leaves...longswords?" she suggested.

I tilted my head. "Hmmm..."

Longswords were a good compromise between length and ease of use, but something about the concept wasn't sitting quite right with me.

Rike and I continued to think, but then, Diana threw out a suggestion. "What about that blade you made for the demon?"

"Bingo!" I cried. At the same time, Rike exclaimed, "That's perfect!"

I forgot it was even an option!

That was how I decided to forge a second katana.

A katana of my own, forged with my two hands. Just thinking those words made me excited. But today was our vacation. Work hard, play hard. Rest was key to doing a good job.

Come to think of it, I'd been working diligently ever since coming to this world. Of course, at the beginning, I'd been just trying to get my life in order.

At this point, we would be able to eat, even if we only spent three

days a week in the workshop. With Rike's help, I only had to take charge of making elite models, which could all be forged in a single day.

Such freedom was, in large part, thanks to Camilo buying our goods on the regular.

One of these days, I'd love to take everyone out on a proper trip, and not just a day trip like our picnic today. However, since I'd just gotten back from a fairly long journey and Lucy had only just joined our family, I figured that we might not have an opportunity for a vacation until later on down the line.

And of course, I would have to make sure everyone else was on board as well.

We whiled away our time and slowly, the sun began to set. It hadn't felt like we'd been lounging for so long, but we had come home past noon, so it was about time.

After quickly tidying up, we headed inside. Krul returned to her hut. Lucy looked like she wanted to come into the cabin with us, but she was still cautious; she watched Samya enter first instead of dashing in straight away.

Lucy cautiously padded through the door, but once she was in, she took a thorough sniff of the air and began to nose around. Since there weren't any lit fires and all the sharp objects were safely stored away, we left her to her own devices.

Having finished her survey of the living room and kitchen, she went up to the door of my room and pawed at it with her front legs until it opened. She went inside and circled the room, sniffing at everything. Then, she came out and repeated the process with the guest room and everyone else's bedrooms. Having mapped out the entire house with her nose, she identified a comfy corner of the living room, where she curled up and fell asleep.

Her nap didn't last for long though. When Diana and Helen brought out the wooden swords from their rooms and went outside to spar, Lucy jumped awake and dashed out after them.

The rest of us wiped ourselves down and washed up. The other two would do so later.

I started on dinner. We had eaten a late lunch, so I planned to keep the menu light. I'd considered skipping dinner completely, but I figured that Diana and Helen would be hungry after their practice. It felt unnatural to cook only their portions too.

I first boiled some of the dried meat in the pot, a portion of which I set aside for Lucy. For everyone else, I added in root vegetables, cured meat, and seasoning to make a proper stew.

I prepared flatbread only for Diana and Helen though. The bread could be surprisingly filling.

Before long, Diana, Helen, and Lucy came back inside. The two women went to their own rooms to dust off, while Lucy flopped back down in the corner she had occupied earlier.

I should put out a blanket for her...

I dished out the stew and set the table. When I put Lucy's food in a dish and placed it beside the table, she plopped down right in front of it. She looked around at us but made no moves to start eating. Had she scarfed down her lunch so quickly earlier because she'd been starving? I felt a little guilty.

Well, first, I can't forget to praise her for her good behavior!

"You're waiting for us? You're such a good girl." I reached out to pet her head and scratch her neck. She wagged her tail energetically.

The six of us said *itadakimasu* then tucked in, and Lucy started eating as well. Diana's eyes were sparkling. Since I was sitting away from her, my shoulder remained unharmed this time.

"I heard this from Samya before, but forest wolves really are clever," I remarked.

"Aren't they?" Samya said.

Lucy might have been an outlier, considering her history. She and her mother had been chased away or abandoned by their pack, she'd lost her mother in a fight with a bear, and she now had to acclimate to life here with us.

I didn't think we'd have to give her up now that we were taking care of her. And as she spent more time with us, I thought she might grow used to a role that was similar to a house dog. That would make her a pretty rare case.

After we had finished eating and were clearing the table, Lucy started scratching at the front door.

"What is it, girl? Is there something outside?" I paused to open the door for her.

She went outside, and with her nose twitching, she began to plod around the garden. Curious, I followed after her only to find out that her destination was Krul's hut.

"Aaah, you want to sleep with Big Sis Krul, is that it?"

Lucy stopped in front of the hut, her tail wagging furiously. Diana would've probably let Lucy sleep in her bed, but since this was what Lucy wanted, I wasn't going to stop her.

I crouched down next to her and pet her gently. "Well then, good night, girl."

She walked into the hut, her rump wiggling happily.

I got up the next morning and left the house with the water jugs as usual. Outside, I found both Krul and Lucy waiting for me.

"Our little lady is awake already?" I said to the pup.

She wagged her tail and barked once, though it was a soft sound. Did she know that the others were still sleeping?

“Good girl, good girl. You want to come along with me and your big sis? Let’s go.”

I slung the water jugs around Krul’s neck and set off on our one-person and two-animal mission to fetch water—albeit a micromission that only took thirty minutes on foot.

The morning air in the forest was cleaner and fresher in the morning, perhaps because it was cooler than the afternoon. I instinctively took a deep breath; the crisp air filled my lungs and helped boot up my half-asleep brain.

We must have been quite a strange sight for anyone looking on: a train consisting of a human, a drake, and a wolf heading into the forest before the sun had yet to fully rise.

When we arrived at the lake, I made sure to first fill the jugs before letting ourselves enjoy the water. I wiped Krul down and was about to help Lucy clean off too when she jumped into the lake with a *splash!*

Seeing as she had already done half the work, I joined in, washing her body by scrubbing my hands through her fur. Since she seemed to be enjoying herself, I resolved to give her baths like this once in a while.

I wrung out the towel I’d brought with me—the same one I used to wash myself—and dried off Lucy’s dripping fur. It was impossible to dry her completely, but this was better than leaving her soaking wet.

I’ll have to get Lucy her own towel to use from tomorrow onward. Even if she didn’t bathe every day, I would have to towel her dry when she played around in the water, and if she didn’t jump into the lake, we could just bring the towel home without using it.

We returned to the cabin. I collected the jugs Krul was carrying and brought them back into the house, along with my own.

“Can’t forget your food, eh?” I mumbled.

Starting today, I’d be preparing Lucy’s breakfast along with ours. In this case, “prepare” meant that I would boil dried meat in plain water. I would do the same during lunch. After the next hunt, I’d change the lunch menu up.

I heated two pots of water—one for Lucy’s breakfast and one for ours. Lucy’s pot came to a boil first since I had filled it with less water. I estimated that I would be able to finish making our flatbread in the time it took her meat to stew.

Once her meat was done, I cut it into thin strips and left it out to cool. I didn’t want to waste the water I’d used to cook the meat, so I poured it into the soup pot. The water should have taken on some of the flavor from the meat too.

Lucy was practically jumping at my heels. I pacified her as best I could while continuing to make our food. By the time our soup was ready, her portion of meat had also cooled to the perfect temperature.

The family, including Lucy, gathered around the table, said *itadakimasu* (while Lucy waited), and dug in, as per the Eizo family routine. Everything was the same as usual, but at the same time, it felt a little livelier than before.

After breakfast, we moved to the workshop, prayed for the day's work to go smoothly, and settled in. We decided to put Lucy outside since it was dangerous in the forge.

I opened the forge's outside door and entrusted Lucy to Krul. "If you need anything, knock on the door, okay?"

"*Kululu*," Krul chirruped.

"*Yip!*" barked Lucy.

I didn't know if they understood what I had said, but at least they both replied energetically.

Time for me to get to work.

I turned once again to the *kamidana* shrine, clapped my hands together in prayer, and then removed the appoitakara I had stored there. I'd used a portion for Helen's dual blades, but I figured there should still be enough remaining to make one sword for myself.

Should...

Worried, I consulted my cheats, but it seemed like I'd be able to make it work.

I slid the entire chunk of appoitakara into the firebed to heat up. The metal glowed blue as if it were frosty cold, but I could tell through my cheats that it was heating properly. I removed it from the fire when it reached its forging temperature and began to strike it with my hammer.

It rang like glass or ice being struck, and the sound reverberated through the workshop.

Rike was observing me today since it was a rare opportunity to see appoitakara being smithed. Listening to the dulcet tones coming from the metal, she said, "It really is a beautiful sound."

"And in a way that's different from mithril, right?" I replied.

Mithril produced a clear, high-pitched ring. Few blacksmiths would ever have the opportunity to compare the sounds of these two rare metals.

The rest of the gang were making metal plates. I could entrust Samya and Diana with the task of hammering out the metal now, and Lidy and Helen were there to help as well. The myriad of sounds coming from their work was familiar to the ear and pleasing in its own way.

I swung my hammer down on the luminous blue metal as if to join

in the jam session.

It took a full day to remove impurities from the appoitakara and elongate the block into a thin bar. By dusk, I had finished the *sunobe* step of making a Japanese katana.

Appoitakara was certainly more difficult to work with than mithril. Though it was a challenge, the process went smoother than I'd anticipated. Of course, my cheats were helping me out, but I sensed that my skills had improved as well—that was a trend I would be happy to see continue.

I may have owed my blacksmithing know-how to my cheats, but whether my body could play out the required actions was an independent variable. I'd come this far by forging the occasional new type of weapon (though I hadn't gotten that chance lately). My experiments with mithril and appoitakara—two rare and unique metals—should have also influenced my skill level.

For my personal katana, I would be replicating the process I'd used for the demon Nilda's commission...except for a few steps, which I planned to skip.

Traditional katanas consisted of two layers of steel; the hard outside layer was called the *kawagane*, and the soft core was the *shingane*. But, since appoitakara was fundamentally different from steel, there was no need to create two distinct layers. My pure appoitakara katana wouldn't stick exactly to the letter of Japanese smithing tradition, but I hadn't done that when I'd forged Nilda's sword either...

Because of appoitakara's properties, I would be skipping the quenching and tempering steps as well. A katana's characteristic curve was produced during quenching, but I was going to shape my own blade by hand.

There was room to question whether what I was making could really be classified as a katana. However, as long as the blade was unbendable and unbreakable—which it would be—I decided that it would count.

That evening, Lucy ate with us in the cabin, but when it was time for bed, she went to sleep in Krul's hut.

She's still a tiny scrap of a thing, but could she be trying to help out as a guard dog?

Hardly any people or animals approached this clearing in the first place though. Of course, it was possible (maybe even *likely*) that Lucy simply wanted to sleep with her big sister. She was still a juvenile, so as far as I was concerned, there was no need for her to exert herself.

The next morning, I went out to the lake with Krul and Lucy. The wolf pup trotted a little ways ahead of Krul and me—our new travel

companion didn't get underfoot, so neither of us were tripped up. I could tell that Lucy was deliberately taking care to not cause us trouble. Judging from my observations of her over the last two days, I knew that she was smart.

Unlike yesterday, Lucy didn't dive into the lake water, so I wiped her down with a damp towel that I'd saturated and wrung out.

After returning to the cabin, I cooked breakfast and the household ate together. The people were in for another full day of blacksmithing; Krul and Lucy stayed outside.

Today, I would begin the *hizukuri* stage—aka, the shaping stage—of forging my katana. Rike had seen her fill of me working with appoitakara the day before, so she and the others were making swords.

To be honest, I had waffled over whether I should have her observe today too. I'd thought it best to show her whatever I could, but Rike had said, "Beyond this point, I think I would have to try handling the metal myself and see if I can forge with it."

So, long story short, I was working alone for the day.

I heated up the long, thin, rectangular bar of appoitakara and hammered it into a pentagonal bar, just as I had with Nilda's katana. Though I figured I'd already maxed out the metal's capacity for intaking magical essence, as I completed the shaping, it continued to absorb magic at a steady pace.

Unfortunately, the side effect was that the katana also grew more resistant with every strike.

Every time my mind began to wander, I refocused and brought my hammer down on the metal again, striking it steadily as the hours ticked by. By the end of the day, I had a thin strip of appoitakara with a pentagonal cross section. I had yet to shape the katana's tip, the *kissaki*, or to bend the blade into an arc, but the sun was already setting.

"This is going to be difficult..." I mumbled.

Helen's new swords hadn't posed a great challenge. Maybe it was because they'd had a simple rectangular profile, or maybe for some other reason entirely. However, shaping the katana's tip and tang was looking like it would be an uphill battle.

On the other side of the forge, the others were still churning out swords. Their pace was faster than it had been. Rike, Samya, Diana, Lidy, and now Helen—it was thanks to the five of them and their help that I was able to work on projects I was interested in.

I'd been presuming upon their kindness this whole time. That was a fact.

I did consider the money we earned to be a shared pool, but besides everyday necessities, none of them had ever asked for

anything.

I owe them...and I want to return their favor. Even just one favor...

The wheels in my head were turning as I tidied up my workspace.

The next day was dedicated to shaping the body of the katana out of the pentagonal bar I had so painstakingly forged. At its core, the work was the same as yesterday's, so I instructed Rike and the others to continue focusing on their regular smithing tasks.

I planned to finish shaping the blade during the *hizukuri* stage, so I would be skipping a few parts of the forging process (of course, I had to make the guard and scabbard before I could call the katana complete). However, the work from this point on would require more focus than ever.

First, I had to shape the *kissaki*, which required three steps. One: cut the end of the katana diagonally from the bladed edge. Two: hammer the edge of the tip into an arc. Three: sharpen the tip into a point.

I debated whether to make a *ikubi kissaki* tip like last time, but I thought it would be boring to choose the same design. Ultimately, I decided on an *o-kissaki* tip. Both tips were curved in profile, but the *o-kissaki* was longer.

It took me the entire morning to shape the tip, but when I beheld the results, I knew that I'd made the right decision.

This time, I didn't have to worry about introducing a novel weapon design to this world. I knew that the primary purpose of this katana was for self-defense.

Theoretically, it would be ideal if I never ran into a situation where I had to use it...or, that's what I tried to tell myself. The sight of the *o-kissaki* tipped katana alone might not be enough to scare off beasts or foes, but if my enemy lost the will to fight after seeing the blade slicing toward their face, that was good enough for me.

I was at the perfect stopping point, but the team of women wanted to go a little longer. Sadly, that meant everyone besides me would still be working...

They all stayed in the workshop while I returned to the living area to cook lunch. As I stepped over the threshold, I muttered, "It's definitely cooler on this side of the house."

There was a big temperature difference between the forge and the living quarters, which was hardly a surprise since we kept the workshop fire roaring throughout the day.

It wasn't just your average cooking fire either—the flames had to be hot enough to heat iron. Calling our forge a sauna would be a gross understatement. It was actually scorching, though you only had to cross the threshold to another room (an interval the thickness of one

door) to feel a temperature difference.

Helen had come to live with us only recently, so she was still getting used to the heat, but everyone else had already grown accustomed to it. Nevertheless, there was a limit to how acclimated one could be to such a harsh environment. It wasn't as if we'd stopped sweating... We all still sweated buckets.

We kept water jugs in the forge for rehydration, and we each had a cup of our own (wooden ones with our names carved into them). Everyone made sure to drink regularly. Drink water in—sweat it back out.

Anyway, after I'd prepared lunch and the women had finished up the morning's work, all of us, myself included, wiped ourselves down with a wrung-out, damp towel. It was normal for us to be covered with charcoal and grime after working, but the towels we used ended up picking up other kinds of muck too. In other words...our bodies were dirty to begin with.

For the current era in this world's timeline, a certain amount of dust and dirt was the standard as far as hygiene went. I just went along with it. None of the others seemed particularly dissatisfied by our griminess either. Not even Diana—a young noble lady of the Eimoor family—voiced any complaints, which likely meant that the nobility kept similar habits when it came to washing.

Come to think of it, when I stayed at the Eimoor estate, I usually cleaned myself off with a cloth soaked in hot water.

However, what one needed and what one wanted were two different things. I could endure the situation without bellyaching, but as a (former) Japanese man born into a culture who loved a long soak as much as the Romans, my heart yearned for the satisfaction of a good bath.

I could live without an ice-cold beer to top off my evenings, but at the very least, I longed to immerse myself in a tub of steaming hot water.

A proper bath required two elements: water and heat, both of which were needed in large amounts. If I came up with a way to secure both components, I could talk to the others and see about building a bathhouse.

I had thought about my plans as I cleaned myself up and prepared lunch. By the time I finished cooking, everyone else had returned to the living room. After she'd wiped herself off, Diana opened the front door, and Lucy zoomed in immediately.

I peeked out through the open door and saw Krul off to the side, grazing on a patch of grass.

Krul *could* eat anything, but she preferred plants to meat. I'd seen her grazing several times in the past. While we couldn't invite her into

the house, it wouldn't be a bad idea to eat outside more often the way we did a few days ago—that way, she could join us in our meal.

After lunch, I returned to my station. Next on the agenda was shaping the body of the katana into an arc to mimic the effects of quenching.

All of a sudden, I was struck with an epiphany.

I'd noticed that the areas of the *appoitakara* that had absorbed magic were subtly different in color. It must've had something to do with the way magical essence changed how the metal glowed. I realized that I could take advantage of this property to create the *hamon*.

A katana's *hamon* was the pattern that ran along the blade's length, and it became visible once the sword was quenched. Since I was planning to skip the quenching step, I'd resigned myself to settling for a katana without a *hamon*...but if I pulled off what I was thinking, then I could perhaps end up with just the sword I'd been hoping for.

My heart sped up in excitement. I picked up my hammer and faced the katana, which was shaping up nicely.

As I hammered the metal, I pictured the type of *hamon* I wanted to embellish the katana with. By striking along only the bladed edge of the sword, I elongated that side, causing the spine of the sword to bow outwards. To top things off, the side where I focused my blows got an extra dose of magical essence—it began to glow more brightly, forming a contrast between the edge side and the spine side. The boundary where the two sides met formed the *hamon* (or, something similar enough for my purposes).

The *hitatsura hamon*, an irregular and discontinuous pattern that spread out all across the flat of the blade, was impossible to achieve with this method. Even the *choji hamon*, which looked like a line of choppy waves, seemed difficult. The best I could do was likely to be the *gunome hamon*, a highly regular pattern that resembled half-circles nestled next to each other.

I hammered out the metal steadily, setting the apex of the arc midway down the katana's length. I relied on my cheats to tell me how and where to strike.

The *hamon* I chose in the end was a moderately wavy line known as the *notare*. It was the same one I had chosen for Nilda's sword, but honestly, I'd taken a liking to the way her katana had turned out and had been coveting it.

Focused as I'd been on the fact that I needed a weapon for self-defense, I never would have thought of forging a katana. I was so glad that Diana had come up with the idea for me. Thanks to her, I now had a chance to make a katana to my own tastes. If she hadn't

suggested it, I might've ended up reluctantly making a short-staffed corseque—a pole weapon, the head of which forked into three prongs, and the left and right prongs were bladed.

I kept working, and soon, I finished up the body of the blade. After that, I moved on to shaping the tang. *Hizukuri* wasn't the usual step where a smith would work on the tang, but my workflow had already vastly deviated from traditional Japanese techniques.

The *munematchi* and *hamachi* were notches which divided the blade from the tang. The former was cut into the spine side, and the latter, the bladed edge. I cut these two notches with a chisel and adjusted the shape of the tang with my hammer. Lastly, I shaped the butt end of the tang, or the *nakago jiri*.

The katana gave off a faint blue glow. It was an impressive sight to behold.

Though I was excited to see the sword taking form, night had fallen, so I would have to save the rest of the work for tomorrow. Of course, I could have pulled an all-nighter to finish the katana today, but I had resolved not to do that. Besides, the katana was more of a personal project than actual work.

And so, I banked the fire with ash, bringing the day's work to an end. The flames which had burned crimson throughout the day were now cloaked in a mantle of gray. We kept the firebed hot throughout the day, so it wouldn't be wrong to say that we were wasting the heat when we weren't actively using it.

Hmmm, is there anything else we could use the heat for...?

I stored the almost-complete katana underneath the *kamidana*, placing it on the same stand I'd used when working on Nilda's commission.

Finally, the day was over.

The next morning, before taking out the katana from beneath the shrine, I put my hands together in a prayer to pay my respects.

"You know what I've realized since coming to live here? Northern customs have an air of reverence," Helen commented appreciatively.

The religions in this world were laid back, perhaps because they were polytheistic.

There was a god of commerce, of war, of beauty, and the list went on. There were priests, and institutions dedicated to worshipping specific gods, but no animosity between any of the faiths. Among the people of this world, there was a shared understanding that the person you were speaking to could worship another god.

This relaxed approach to religion was apparently another aftereffect of the war six hundred years ago. The war had imposed a sharp divide between the gods of demonkind and the gods of

humanity (and the other races). Having a common enemy made it easier for the gods standing on the same side to unite.

Setting aside any fervent adherents, the average person in this world also didn't pray every day. The existence of gods was merely an idea they carried in the corners of their hearts.

Out of curiosity, I'd once asked Diana if large temples existed around here. She (and Rike and Helen) had informed me that, even in the capital, there weren't any.

Samya and Lidy, who'd lived among nature, believed the forests themselves to be an existence similar to a god (hence Samya's practice of burying the hearts of the animals she hunted).

"Half of what you've seen are just my personal customs, though," I told Helen. I honestly didn't know if the northern regions had any similar traditions to my own. They likely did, but the details might have been different.

"Really?" Helen looked interested, but she didn't ask any further.

I guess it's time to start work.

I'd been very careful and thorough throughout the smithing process, but there were still minor imperfections on the surface of the katana. I hammered at it and smoothed over the metal with a file.

From the start of the project, I'd been concerned about whether I'd be able to file down the appoitakara at all, especially since it was imbued with magic. However, I managed; it had been worth strengthening the file with magic beforehand. In any case, if I hadn't been able to file the surface, it wouldn't have been a huge loss. I would've just done my best to hammer the surface smooth and left it at that.

I was able to sharpen the tip of the blade with our whetstone as well, but as I worked I sensed that if I moved the blade even minutely out of line, it would grow dull in an instant. Nevertheless, by relying on my cheats, I pushed through all doubts.

Lastly, I hammered out the tang and engraved it with my name: Eizo Tanya. Now there were two katanas in this world that bore my signature.

I still had to make the guard, hilt, and scabbard, but there wasn't enough time left in the day to make all three. Since I'd finally finished shaping the blade, I was impatient to test it out.

I decided to make a grip out of unfinished wood—it was a simple placeholder, something that was literally no more than a place to grip. I carved the inside of the pieces to match the shape of the tang, dotted the edge with glue, and adhered the two sides together. I finished the temporary grip by carving it down to a shape that was easy to hold. After slotting the tang into the grip, I secured it with wooden nails. Then, I headed outside with the katana.

When I opened the door, I found Lucy waiting, her tail wagging from side to side.

“Back up, back up. It’s dangerous for you to stay next to me,” I warned her.

She barked brightly in reply and padded away, though whether she had done so because she understood what I’d said was unclear to me. Her tail never stopped swishing, not even for a second.

I had never owned a dog before, so I wasn’t sure how smart Lucy was. However, she seemed to be able to figure out most of what I told her. Could she have been driven from the pack because she was so clever? Not that the answer really mattered at this point.

Krul was dozing off a few paces away. I wondered if she was recharging her magical batteries.

The others swarmed out of the workshop after me. Diana and Helen were carrying wooden swords (Helen was carrying two wooden shortswords), so they were probably going to spar.

But what’s everyone else doing out here...?

“We’re all curious to see the blade you’ve put so much soul into forging, Boss,” Rike explained with a chuckle.

“Bet it’s a beast,” Samya drawled. She’d seen all the different types of weapons I’d made up to this point and probably wanted to see what I had come up with this time.

Lidy hadn’t said a word since she’d stepped outside, but her twinkling eyes betrayed her interest.

“Don’t get too close. You might get hurt.” I gave an exasperated smile and received a five-toned chorus of affirmative responses.

Among our stash of wood we kept outside the house, there was one chunk about the size of a person. I stood it up at one end of the garden.

I took up a fighting stance, leveraged my combat cheats, then slashed the log horizontally through the middle, as if drawing the kanji character for “one.”

My body felt more attuned to the katana than it had to any other weapon. I encountered no resistance as I whipped the blade around, and it made no noise other than the crisp *swish* of metal slicing through air.

A blue light traced the path of my blade like a ribbon of water. It looked stunning.

Judging by my swing, the others (besides Helen) might’ve found it hard to keep up with my movements; it was likely that, by the time they realized it, I would’ve already completed my attack. Well, maybe Diana and Samya had been able to follow the motion of my blade, but it was probably impossible for Rike and Lidy.

The block of wood I had cut through was still standing upright as

if nothing at all had happened. I went up to it and tapped it with the hilt of the katana—the upper half slid down and hit the ground.

“Amazing!!!” Helen yelled in a voice loud enough to echo throughout the entirety of the Black Forest.

Krul leaped to her feet at the sound and Lucy’s tail puffed up for a second like a cat’s. Though, when they realized that Helen had been the source of the commotion, they calmed back down.

It was unclear whether Helen noticed everyone else’s reactions because she just kept gushing excitedly. “It cut through the wood without making a sound! Unbelievable!!!”

The katana I had forged for Nilda had been of exceptional quality too, but since hers had been made from steel, the cutting edge of my katana was in a different class. I’d accumulated experience from forging various weapons (Nilda’s katana included), so I already had an inkling of how this one would perform. Perhaps it was half-hubris, but the sensation of the katana passing through the wood had just felt different.

Come to think of it, I’d never tested out whether my combat cheats were affected by the type of weapon I wielded. I’d fought with shortswords and spears, but I hadn’t tried out many other weapons.

Maybe weapon affinities applied here, and I was most suited for a katana. Of course, since I’d already forged the thing, I would be happy if I did happen to have an affinity for it.

Ideally though, I would never have the opportunity to unleash the powers of my katana on a real opponent.

Out loud and intentionally vague, I said, “Even better than I expected.” There was no way I could discuss my theories about affinities with the others.

I brought the katana up again and thrust it at the remaining half of the wooden block. The lance of blue light pierced through the air, and the katana sunk into the wood soundlessly like before. I didn’t feel the impact this time either.

Removing my hand from the sword, I rounded the back of the log where the tip was just peeking through. I then pulled the katana out of the wood. “A shield probably couldn’t block this sucker,” I muttered, half to myself.

“Probably not,” Helen agreed. As a mercenary, she had more experience in this area than anyone else in the family. “Anyone who underestimates your sword because of its slimness is in for a surprise. I’m sure glad I’m not your enemy,” she added with an exaggerated shudder.

Her tone and body language were playful, but her words seemed to be sincere; her eyes weren’t laughing.

“It might be overkill as a self-defense weapon, but you know what

they say: better safe than sorry. The sharper, the better, right?"

Helen nodded firmly. I was relieved to have her seal of approval. She was a mercenary who'd earned the nickname Lightning Strike, after all. Samya had apparently sensed what I was feeling because she was smiling.

"What are you going to name it?" Rike asked, bouncing in excitement.

"What do you mean?" I asked, not following.

"A beautiful weapon like this one deserves to be named," she insisted. "The blades we make are usually destined to be sold, so it wouldn't make sense for you to name them, but this one's all yours, right Boss? In that case, the right to name it belongs to you."

I see. I didn't know they had such a custom in this world.

Come to think of it, many of the weapons that appeared in the legends and myths of my previous world also had names. *Gungnir*, the spear of Odin, came to mind, as did *Heavenly Sword of Gathering Clouds*, one of the three imperial regalia of Japan. Then there was the *Haccho Nenbutsu*, *Kasen Kanesada*, and *Higekiri*, all renowned katanas that had actually existed.

I felt a little self-conscious at the idea of treating my katana the same as such legendary blades...however, since it was made of a precious metal and was a beautiful piece of work, it was only right to name it. I also thought it deserved to have a name that wasn't mine, which was carved in the tang.

"You're right..." I muttered, taking some time to think.

Blue trails of light followed every movement of the katana, so *Flowing Water* might be fitting. There was nothing wrong with the name, per se, but I wanted to give the question some more thought.

After some time, I hit on a name.

"Diaphanous Ice. This katana shall be known as Diaphanous Ice."

The faint blue glow of *Diaphanous Ice* was a result of the cool metal it was made of. That was why ice was a more appropriate moniker than water. Katanas were also slimmer and more lightweight than western swords, hence diaphanous.

I drew inspiration from Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a renowned samurai and military commander, and one of his katanas named *Diaphanous Green* (it was known by a host of other names besides). That was why I chose the name instead of a more common phrase like *Thin Ice*.

"Ice, huh?" Samya mumbled.

"Have you ever seen ice before?" I asked.

She responded with a small nod. "It rarely snows around these parts, but there have been a few cold winters. Seeing my water

supplies freeze over gave me a real shock.”

“Aaah, I see.”

I was guessing that she’d also heard stories from her mother in the short time they’d lived together, but hearing about ice and seeing it for yourself were very different things.

Diana quickly jumped in. “Could you be talking about three years ago?”

“Yeah, I think it was around then...?” Samya replied.

“That year, the winter was exceptionally bitter.”

The Black Forest and the capital were close together (relatively speaking), so their climates were likely similar.

Since we lived in the middle of the forest, the wind was likely less harsh here, but in terms of the general weather, Samya and Diana’s experiences from the previous five years seemed to be similar.

“It doesn’t get cold near my home forge,” Rike remarked, “so in a way, I’m looking forward to it.”

Lidy added her own experience. “My forest was fairly warm as well. I wonder if it has to do with the wind circulation patterns.”

In the day and age I’d found myself in, people were able to travel around freely. Thus, it was hard to find a person who hadn’t heard the word ice or didn’t know what it was. However, there were apparently a good number of people who had never physically seen it.

This was similar to people who lived in landlocked prefectures in Japan—they rarely set eyes on the ocean. Though, most people did visit the shore at least a few times in their lives.

“I’ve traveled all over, so I’ve seen some massive blocks of ice,” Helen commented.

In her job as a mercenary, she had traveled to frosty regions several times in the past. She told us that, in the coldest locale, she had seen an ice block almost a full meter tall. That location had originally been suitable for work, but there’d been a sudden cold spell. Because of the extreme cold, they weren’t able to perform their duties.

It’s definitely hard to work when you’re frozen...

The northern regions of this world were also chilly...or so my installed data informed me. Therefore, it wasn’t the least bit strange for a man who supposedly hailed from the north like me to have seen ice before.

One of these days, I’d like to travel to other regions and expand my knowledge about this world.

As we returned to the workshop, we continued chatting about the climates in the places we’d come from. Diana and Helen remained outside to spar while Krul and Lucy watched as their audience.

In the forge, I placed *Diaphanous Ice* beneath the *kamidana*, cleaned up, and then closed the workshop.

The next day, after finishing my morning tasks, I set up in the forge and lit the firebed. I still had to make the metal fixtures such as the guard, the cap of the hilt (which was called the *kojiri*), and the *habaki* (which locked the blade and scabbards together). They were small but crucial parts of the katana.

Before making the scabbard, I brought in a piece of wood from outside. I outlined then carved a model of *Diaphanous Ice*, and using the model, I started work on the scabbard. The most challenging part was making sure the blade would be suspended within the scabbard when it was sheathed. That being said, I would be relying on my cheats to help me figure that out anyway.

The process itself was no different than what I was used to—I carved out a hollow for the sword and glued the two halves of the scabbard together. I sealed the scabbard with the same oil I used for the scabbards of western-style swords.

Ideally, I would be able to lacquer it instead. I should ask Camilo if there's any chance he could procure me some lacquer from the north.

While the sheath dried, I made the hand guard, *kurikata* (a metal piece that a cloth can be tied to), and other accessories. Since the sword was for personal use and not for sale, I kept the design simple. If I wanted something more elaborate, I could always embellish it during one of our rest days.

Since all the small metal pieces could be made using steel, I was able to churn them out quickly. Finally, I fit all the pieces together.

My katana was complete, once and for all.

Using a simple length of cloth as a makeshift sword belt, I suspended the katana, with its plain wooden scabbard and leather-wrapped handle, from my waist.

Experimentally, I unsheathed the blade. It felt just right.

I can bring this guy around with me everywhere.

But...I was still attired in my NPC villager garb.

I always wore a leather apron while I was smithing, but my usual outfit consisted of a hemp shirt, leather vest, and simple pants. To add a katana—modest though it was—to this getup...didn't feel right to me.

I found myself asking everyone else for their opinion. "Say...isn't there something *off* about this look?"

But no one else found the katana paired with my clothing to be unusual.

What'd I expect? It's not as if they'd ever seen a kimono or hakama. I'd love to get my hands on some Japanese-style clothing one of these days, and I can make a katana sword belt myself.

I wasn't fully satisfied, but at least I now had a powerful weapon

to use for protection. With this, I could rest a little easier when we left the house.

For now, I placed the sword beneath the *kamidana*.

Chapter 5: Toward a Life of Abundance

Before going out for water the next day, I strapped *Diaphanous Ice* to my waist. If today's trip to the lake was anything like the usual ones, then bringing along a katana would be massive overkill—it would be like equipping an endgame weapon in an RPG's starting village.

But prevention is better than cure, or so the saying goes. The katana was hardly a bother to carry and was even less obtrusive than I'd expected. Besides, it was always better to be prepared; there was no telling what could happen.

Right?

Right?

I definitely wasn't bringing the katana simply because I was happy to have finished forging it yesterday. I wasn't thinking that at all...

In the end, the trek to and from the lake was uneventful. Krul, Lucy, and I freshened up in the cool shallows like always and brought back the day's supply of water.

I did note that these morning trips didn't yield enough water to fill a bath. If we were going to try and build one, I would have to think of a way to draw large quantities of water in one go. The water in the lake *did* well up from the ground in places, which meant that there was a confined aquifer running somewhere beneath the surface. There, the groundwater likely ran between permeable layers of earth, so digging a well could be one viable option.

Luckily for us, I was also able to use wind magic. My magic wasn't strong enough to send a man flying, but it was at least enough to direct airflow through an opening. The drawback was that I couldn't dig and sustain the wind magic at the same time, so someone else would have to do the manual labor.

Or, another idea—we could make a canal like a certain idol group named after a major city in Japan had when they'd been challenged with living on an uninhabited island. Our living conditions were a step above what they'd had to contend with, so the canal's construction wouldn't take as much time.

Though...it'd taken them two and a half years to dig a 500-meter-long canal. Granted, they hadn't spent all of their time on the construction. Assuming we focused all our efforts on the project and

nothing went wrong, it could take us the same amount of time to cross the one-kilometer distance separating the lake from the cabin.

On the plus side, we would also be able to construct a waterwheel (depending on how we designed the canal). We could then harness hydropower to operate a giant hammer, which would make forging plate metal a ton easier.

If we indeed planned to live here for several decades, it wasn't a bad idea to build these sorts of facilities sooner rather than later, even if it cost us time upfront. However, I was in no rush to flesh this plan out—there were other issues to contend with before that. The rainy season would soon be upon us. Before the rains hit, and after our next delivery into town, I wanted to spend two weeks building a facility of sorts.

All right, “facility” was a bit of an exaggeration. A terrace, more accurately.

So, with those plans forming in my mind, I set upon today's work—making elite model products as quickly as I could. With the experience of forging appoitakara (both sword and katana) under my belt, I felt like my speed had increased yet again.

I was now able to do more by muscle memory, the same way musicians became more attuned to their instruments as they practiced. My body knew where I was supposed to hammer and with how much force.

This should be enough to meet our standing order with Camilo.

Honestly, Camilo would probably be content with only our entry-level models. However, it felt discourteous to not bring in at least a few elite models. It went against my personal sense of honor.

Bright and early the next morning, we piled up the delivery goods onto the cart. As we were packing everything in, Krul came ambling over. Having made the trip several times already, she knew by now that the cart being loaded was a sign that we were going to the city.

I patted her head as I hitched her to the cart. Once we were done with our preparations, I picked up Lucy and placed her into the cart before the rest of us. Given her size, the cart was still too tall of a hurdle to clear by herself.

Lucy sniffed her way around the cart, her tail wagging furiously.
Could she be excited by the higher vantage point?

The rest of us climbed onto the cart after her, and we set off. Krul trilled and started walking. Rike sat in the front, her hands on the reins, and Lucy sat next to her, looking forward; her tail never stopped wiggling, not even for a second.

The scenery shifted as we went, from densely wooded forest to open city roads. I was worried about how Lucy would react to the

change in environment, but she continued to wag her tail throughout the journey.

"It's not every day that a forest wolf gets to experience something like this," I remarked.

"That's 'cause there aren't many people who'd keep a wolf as a pet in the first place," Samya pointed out.

"Well," Rike added, "it's also rare for people to ride on a drake-drawn cart."

"That's true," Diana agreed. "I doubt even the ministers have had the chance."

"I've certainly never heard of anyone who has," said Helen. Her wig was snug on her head for the duration of the journey.

Lidy nodded in agreement at everyone's comments about what a rare creature Krul was.

Throughout the trip, Lucy darted around the cart, peering over the edge at the landscape. She reminded me of the kids back in Japan who would stare avidly out the windows during train rides. Everyone did their part in making sure that Lucy didn't accidentally fall off, and before we knew it, we'd arrived at the city.

The guard on duty was a familiar face. He waved when he spotted us, and we waved back in turn.

His gaze lingered on Lucy for a second, but he didn't say anything. Maybe he had come to see these expansions to our party as a regular thing. Maybe bringing a dog (or in Lucy's case, a wolf) was simply no big deal. In any case, I was relieved that we wouldn't have to collar and leash her the way we would've in my previous world.

However, it wasn't a bad idea to fashion a collar of some sort out of string or cloth. I doubted there were many families in these parts that kept a drake or forest wolf, but it would be wise to have something that showed Krul and Lucy belonged to us.

Krul pulled our cart slowly through the city streets. Once in a while, we received some peculiar gazes from people who were curious about Krul or Lidy, but the majority of people ignored us. I would be happy if all the people we passed—the people who had roots in this city and lived here—came to think of us as a part of the everyday scenery.

We ended up making it through town without incident and were soon at Camilo's store. We rode the cart into the storehouse and left Krul to the shop apprentice as usual. Lucy too.

Before we left, I pet Lucy and told her, "Be a good girl and wait here with your big sis."

"Arf!" she barked, her tail wagging.

Good girl.

We turned our backs on the sight of Krul lying down beneath the

shade of a tree and Lucy running around, then proceeded up to the second-floor conference room. There, we waited for Camilo.

Everyone was chatting idly when I suddenly remembered a question that'd been on my mind. I interrupted the conversation and asked, "While we're waiting, I've been meaning to ask you all—is there anything that you want?"

The money we made wasn't for my exclusive use; it was our shared property. That was a fact that I had already relayed to everyone, including Helen, who'd only joined us recently. We'd all agreed upon it. Yet, up until this point, the only person who'd been spending our money was me, and I was starting to feel a little bit uncomfortable...or rather, *guilty* about it.

I'd asked the question before and had gotten some requests for sewing thread or cloth patches. I'd gotten Camilo to add those items to our order, but these things were still everyday, consumable goods. No one had ever asked for anything else they wanted.

I guess that made sense—Samya didn't really understand the concept of material goods, Rike had lived in a communal household where everything'd been shared, and Lidy had lived in a self-sufficient community in the forest. I didn't really expect them to want anything.

Helen had come to our home empty-handed, so she had needed daily necessities. However, she'd previously lived a nomadic lifestyle where she hadn't owned much in the way of personal belongings, so she'd also had no requests.

I'd expected at least Diana, the young lady of a noble family, to have something she wanted to buy, but that didn't appear to be the case either. To my question, she nonchalantly responded, "Not in particular."

"There's no need to hold back," I pressed. "We're not short on money. What about some custom-made clothing?"

"We're living out in the forest, so it's not necessary. Besides, I have extra clothing on hand if push comes to shove, and more back home at the Eimoor estate."

"Hmmm."

I couldn't fault her reasoning. It was true that the style of clothing people wore in the capital wasn't necessary out in the middle of the forest. She'd even purposefully altered a few garments to make them easier to move around in. However, Diana could be called back to the estate by Marius to attend some function or other, so I'd thought it would be prudent for her to have a few more extravagant pieces in her closet. When I thought about it though, I supposed that, as she'd said, one outfit was probably enough. Frankly, since she did have clothing back at the Eimoor estate, it was unlikely that she would run into a dress-related emergency.

“But if you *had* to pick?” I hedged.

“Eh?” Diana pondered a moment, giving the question some thought. “Maybe...accessories that show we’re a family...?”

“I see.”

“I’m...on board with that too,” Helen murmured quietly.

I could relate to wanting a sense of belonging. For the sake of our family, I was willing to do anything, and if anyone were ever in trouble, I would do everything in my power to exterminate the source.

Thinking about the incident that’d led Helen to join the family, I realized that jewelry or trinkets could be confiscated (and probably would be) if any of us were taken captive...but, barring that, it would be more assuring to have a physical symbol of our connection as a family.

“Got it,” I declared. “Then, one of these days, let’s look around for something suitable.” It was the perfect opportunity. I’d drop a word to Camilo later, but I figured that there shouldn’t be any problems.

However, Samya stared back at me with a puzzled expression.

“Does that mean we’re not gonna make them ourselves?”

“Not necessarily—we *can* make them, but I have no experience in design,” I explained. “Absolutely none. We’re going to at least need to find some examples to use as references or some base object that we can tweak.”

Making trinkets fell under the purview of my production-related cheats. However, I also wanted to learn about various aspects of design work.

“So, what is the plan?” Lidy asked. It was rare for her to speak up. Usually, she listened without comment.

“We’ll go to the capital,” I stated.

“All the way to the capital?” Rike asked.

“Is there any reason we shouldn’t?”

“No, I’ve just never been.”

I asked her for the details, and she explained that she hadn’t visited cities very often before becoming my apprentice.

Diana then spoke up, trying to kindly reassure Rike. “It may be the capital in name, but there’s nothing impressive about it besides its size.”

This was true—no matter how big the metropolis, to the people living there, the city was simply their home. But Diana had lived on the Eimoor estate (in other words, in the upper-class district). Whether her experiences would be reliable was questionable. Some things were better left unsaid though, so I kept my mouth shut.

“It’ll be a day trip, so there’s no need to get too worked up over it,” I said. “Just think of it as a short vacation. That goes for everyone.”

We ended our discussion when Camilo and the head clerk entered the room. The clerk came in pushing a cart covered with cloth; I couldn't tell what was underneath it.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?" Camilo asked.

"No, no," I reassured him. "Were your hands full with something?"

Camilo flicked his gaze to the cart. "Yeah. We were busy getting this ready."

So, he was delayed because he'd been preparing this for us...

"The fact that you went to the trouble means that I can expect something really good, right?"

"Bet on it," he quipped, and we shared a laugh. Camilo then signaled the clerk, who nodded and stripped away the cloth cover. Sitting in the cart were two large jars. They were glazed and glossy, sealed with similarly glazed lids.

Camilo waved us over. "Come here, come here."

The way this was playing out, I didn't *think* the jars would contain anything bizarre. However, we all approached the cart with trepidation.

"First, feast your eyes on this." He whipped the lid off one of the jars.

The expressions of everyone—except me—morphed into confusion. The scent drifting from the jar was probably a first for them. But my nose knew the smell quite well...

Aaah, how nostalgic!

"Soy sauce!" I cried out, ecstatic. In spite of myself, I had been so loud that I'd startled the rest of the room. "S-Sorry..." I muttered, shriveling in embarrassment.

Camilo burst out laughing. "An Eizo-like reaction if I've ever seen one. That's right. It's soy sauce from the north."

"Then, this must be..." I pointed at the other jar.

He grinned. "I believe it's called miso."

"Miso?!" I shouted, unable to contain my excitement. I wanted to jump for joy.

After I got control over my emotions, I realized that if soy sauce existed here, then it was hardly a surprise that miso did as well, seeing as they were made from the same plant.

I took the lid off the second jar to reveal the caramel-colored paste that I'd seen a thousand times over. That was miso, no doubt. I then skimmed the surface of the soy sauce with a finger and tasted it. "Low-sodium" wasn't a term in the dictionary in this world, so it was salty and rich with a hint of sweetness. It tasted like the soy sauce I knew and loved.

Afterward, I tried a bit of the miso too. It was light, slightly sweet,

and resembled the barley miso from my previous world. It had been so long since I'd tasted this flavor that both my tongue and stomach immediately clamored for more. I swallowed my tears and tamped down on my desire. Everyone was sure to tease me later on and say something like, "You're such a northerner."

"I can't believe you managed to find them," I gushed.

"Fortunately, I know a peddler with connections in the north," Camilo explained in a blithe tone. "It cost me a little, but I was able to buy some up."

Despite his attempt to appear blasé (or perhaps, because of it) obtaining the two seasonings had obviously been quite a challenge. It also stood to reason that commodities in short supply also came with a hefty price tag—this principle of business was the same in any world. It was a rule I wanted to honor and uphold since I was also in a position where I produced rare and valuable products at a premium cost.

To that end, I asked Camilo, "How much for these jars?"

"Let's see..."

He quickly quoted a price, and it was much less than I'd expected to pay.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Is that really enough?"

"Yeah. I think I've found a means to purchase them regularly, and I can sell them to nobles with a penchant for gourmet food. Consider this a favor. One day, I'll cash it in."

"I appreciate it."

"Besides..." Camilo continued.

"What?"

"Considering the way you reacted, I can rest easy." He broke into a wide smile. "You'll buy up any leftovers I can't move, right?"

Though I pretended to be crushed, I couldn't keep up the farce for long—I burst out laughing, and everyone else joined in too. I turned to face my family. "Hey, everyone, this may be too little too late, but does anyone object to buying the soy sauce and miso?"

"Too late is right," Diana remarked dryly.

"No one in the world would say no after seeing how ecstatic you were," said Lidy.

Everyone else nodded firmly.



I let my shoulders droop in a show of despondency.

Camilo chuckled. "As always, it's a pleasure doing business." He directed the clerk to wrap the ingredients back up.

While I was overjoyed to get my hands on soy sauce and miso, those weren't the only things we needed from Camilo. Our regular kitchen restock list included salt and pepper, two vital ingredients for our meals. We really went through those items, even if our household was majority women...

Granted, "majority" is an understatement since I'm the only man, including Krul and Lucy...

My point was that it took a lot to feed six people, and we used a ton of salt in particular since we also utilized it as a preservative.

Aside from the food products, there were the supplies that we could *technically* live without, but upon which our livelihood depended: charcoal and ore. If we ran out of either, we would no longer be able to forge weapons and our income and savings would dry up.

So, we finalized our order with Camilo, and after, he directed the head clerk to take care of the preparations.

"Sorry to make you run out again when you've just returned," I said, apologizing to the clerk.

He smiled. "This is my job. Please do not concern yourself." At that, he made his exit once more. The head clerk was a handsome guy, so the rakish smile had looked good on him, just like it did on Marius. It wouldn't have had nearly the same effect on my face or Camilo's.

Once the door shut behind the clerk and we were alone, Camilo spoke. "There's...one more thing."

Something must've been up, but whatever he wanted to relay must not be super sensitive since he didn't mind sharing it in front of the rest of the family. I braced myself for the news and gestured for him to continue.

"I want you to handle an order for me."

"What is it?" I asked. "I'm happy to forge anything as long as it's not too complicated."

"It's not anything difficult," he assured.

"Then, is it a big order?"

Camilo shrugged.

Bingo.

"Not weapons though," he continued. "I need a bulk supply of hoes."

"Let me think..."

Hoes weren't hard to forge, and I had made them before. I'd even tried to peddle them when I'd visited the city, but they hadn't sold at

all back then. I never imagined the day would come when I would be commissioned to make them. My heart squeezed with a nameless emotion, but I made an effort to prevent it from showing on my face.

I looked over at Rike. She met my gaze and nodded back.

It would depend on the size of the order, but we would likely be able to forge a fairly large quantity...especially now that we had more hands helping out.

“Got it,” I said, making my decision. “We’ll do it.”

Camilo looked relieved. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“So, how many do you need?” The word “bulk” could mean anything. We’d forged as many as fifty swords before for a bulk order, so I expected fifty or so hoes to be a breeze.

Double that...might be pushing it.

Or would it? One of these days, I should really figure out the limits of my production capabilities.

“Enough to tame the new farmland,” Camilo answered. “Whatever you can manage is fine.”

“That’s...vague.”

“I’ll sell however many you can give me,” he clarified.

“Is that so?”

Camilo nodded. “Remember how I told you that the kingdom’s taken over a parcel of land from the empire? Never mind that the empire gave up on doing anything with it in the first place. In any case, that land has to be cultivated. Its size is nothing to sneeze at, so a small army of people is heading out there. The hoes are for them.”

“I see.”

The majority of farmers heading to the new land were likely tenant farmers—in this region, farmers often borrowed their equipment from landowners, which meant that they wouldn’t own any of their own. Perhaps these farmers were looking to capitalize on this opportunity to become landowners themselves. Farmers in ancient Japan had been through a similar experience—the *Konden Einen Shizai* Law had granted permanent ownership to anyone who cleared uncultivated land. Though I may have changed worlds, people still followed similar thought patterns.

Anyway, regardless of who owned the land and who farmed it, equipment was still a must. Be it the kingdom or the farmers themselves, someone would have to foot the bill and purchase the tools.

Forge Eizo was being asked to provide the hoes. Since the land had been long abandoned, the soil would be hard to till, but our hoes would make that work at least a little easier.

The farmers would also need sickles and the like, but those commissions had probably gone to other forges. If Camilo had asked

our forge to make *all* of the equipment, he would've been violating antitrust laws...though I didn't know if there were any such laws written down in this world. Regardless, even if there weren't any, I wouldn't want to contend with any jealousy from competitors.

"In that case, we'll aim for fifty as our minimum," I stated. "How's next week sound?"

Camilo's eyes widened, but he quickly reverted to his normal expression. "Well...sure. I'll leave it up to you."

"One more thing," I said. "I actually have a request for you too. I need you to pass a message to Marius."

"No problem. What is it?"

I briefed Camilo on the day trip to the capital that we were planning for the day after tomorrow. We were hoping that the Eimoor household could take care of Krul and Lucy during the day. After all, we couldn't wander around the capital with a drake in tow, and it would be heartless to leave Krul all by herself. It'd been a tough decision, but in the end, we decided to leave both animals with the Eimoors, if they would take them.

We'd come up with the plan thinking only of our own needs, so there was a chance the Eimoors wouldn't be able to look after them. In that case, we'd have no choice but to pay an inn to watch over them instead.

"Got it. I'll pass it on," Camilo promised.

With our discussions at an end, Camilo and I shook hands, and the members of Forge Eizo went to prepare for our journey back home.

We left the conference room and went around back to pick up Krul and Lucy. Krul was relaxing, but Lucy was jumping all over the shop boy. Instead of being annoyed, he returned her enthusiasm with zeal. When he saw that we were back, he grew flustered and bowed. "I-I apologize!"

"What's there to apologize for? Thanks for taking care of this little rascal," I said, handing the nervous young man a tip. I gave him more than usual since he had taken care of both Krul and Lucy this time.

"Thank you for your generosity," he said.

"We'll be counting on you from here on out too."

I smiled at him, but the problem was, I was different from Marius and the head clerk, who were youthful and charismatic. I fell into the same category as Camilo: grizzily, middle-aged man. Unlike the handsome prince-on-a-white-stallion types, I wasn't going to be winning any awards with my smile.

Well, it's the thought that counts...right?

We hitched Krul up to the loaded cart, and all of us climbed in. Since Lucy was too small to jump up, Diana lifted her into the back.

Someday, Lucy would be big enough not to need our help getting into the cart. I looked forward to that day, but at the same time, a part of me wanted her to stay as she was.

We proceeded through the city with Krul hauling the cart and Rike at the reins. Lucy watched over the rowdy crowds with her front paws propped up on the rim of the cart and her tail wagging. Looking around us, I saw several passersby who'd noticed Lucy. Since they were generally smiling with amusement rather than looking surprised, I figured it wasn't an unusual sight.

Of course, as it was, Lucy could still pass for a puppy, so she wasn't generating too much commotion. She would grow into her lupine features eventually. When the time came, would we still be able to pass through peacefully? I'd have to put some thought into our future. We traveled to the city regularly, so ideally, people would grow used to seeing us.

At the exit to the city, we waved farewell to the guard on duty, who lifted a hand back in response, and then we rode out of the gate.

The road wound its way through the grassy plains, which were set against a background of blue sky dotted with white clouds. Our drake-drawn cart flew along the path—Krul was in tip-top shape. The way we were barreling down the road, any bandits lying in wait would think twice about attacking us.

Lucy's tail wiggled furiously, as if she was trying to outdo the speed Krul had set. I had worried that Lucy would be scared by the ride, but she was doing perfectly fine. Maybe she had reasoned that there was nothing to be afraid of because the rest of us were relaxed.

We passed down the road without running into any problems and then headed into the forest. Since the ground was uneven, we had to ride at a slower pace, so even if we were in familiar territory, it was still important to stay on our guard. We had recently slain a bear, but bears weren't the only animals we had to worry about.

Once we arrived safely back at the cabin, we split the unloading and storing away work among ourselves. Krul helped out where she could, and Lucy...well, Lucy played the all-important role of cheerleader. Yup.

With all the work done, the rest of the day was free time. Rike and I spent our time "freely" by choosing to huddle about the hoe's production process. Samya and Lidy tended to the field while Diana and Helen hung out with Lucy and Krul outside.

Afterward, over dinner, I said to everyone, "Let's hash out our plans for the next two days. I want to start making the hoes tomorrow, and the day after that, we'll be traveling to the capital. Is there anything we need to prepare?"

"Capital or not, it's just a day trip, right?" Diana asked.

“Well, yeah...”

“In that case, I don’t think I’ll need to be too concerned over what to wear,” she said. “It would be a different story if we were attending a party.”

“That’s definitely not on the agenda,” I assured her. “Even if your brother invited me to one, I’d turn him down...”

She laughed. “You’d break his heart.”

Diana had lived in the capital before, so we could trust her judgment.

“We shouldn’t let this trip go to waste,” I continued. “Think about whether there’s anything else you all want to buy.”

“Whatever we want, you’ll make for us anyway,” Samya joked. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

“Something I can’t make. Something like...like... Well, I guess there’s not a lot that comes to mind,” I conceded.

“See?” Rike said with an unusually triumphant expression.

I was primarily a blacksmith, but I had been granted production-related cheats as well. Any type of object covered by my cheats, I could produce with a quality rivaling a skilled craftsman. I was pretty confident I would be able to make small trinkets and accessories too...but the actual design work was another story. However, realizing the vision of a designer wouldn’t be a problem.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to familiarize yourselves with works of people other than myself?” I suggested.

Rike backed me up, saving my skin. “That could be true,” she pointed out. “It would help broaden our horizons.”

“Right? Just think about it,” I urged everyone.

Thank my lucky stars Rike supported me...

The next day, we split into three teams to ensure that we could fulfill Camilo’s order.

Lidy and Helen were in charge of cutting the wood and making the handles of the hoes. Samya and Diana would make plate metal, which Rike and I would then use to make the hoe’s heads. Obviously, we were only striving for entry-level quality.

Since Camilo had said that the land was uncultivated, instead of making a typical flat-bladed hoe, I decided to make four-pronged hoes instead.

Pronged hoes had been invented in Japan around the Edo period, but their predecessors had been invented as early as the Yayoi period. The first metal hoes were said to have been made during the Kofun period, so it wouldn’t be strange for them to exist in this world. Even if I were the first to introduce them to this world, they wouldn’t be groundbreaking inventions.

"I'll demonstrate by making the first one," I told Rike.

"Yes, please."

I lit the fire and heated a piece of plate metal that we had piled up. It felt like it'd been a long time since I'd done this. Once the metal was heated through, I carved three evenly spaced vertical lines into the plate's surface with a chisel, stopping about two-thirds of the way down. I carefully shaped the head, paying attention to the way it branched out.

By the time I was finished with the overall shape, the metal had cooled. Before I returned it to the firebed, I showed it to Rike. "This is the shape we are aiming for."

"Understood," she said.

I stuck the steel back into the fire to bring it to a workable temperature. The flames crackled and popped, the heat scalding against my face. I wiped away the sweat trickling down my forehead, squinting against the light. However, I didn't look away, not even for a second.

When the metal was at the right temperature, I removed it from the firebed and placed it on the anvil. Hoes were a type of bladed tool as well, so I hammered the tips of the prongs out until they were as thin as a knife's edge. Since this was an entry-level model, and I was using my cheats, I didn't have to make any fine adjustments at the end.

When I finished shaping the head of the hoe, I returned it to the firebed. Next came the socket where the handle would slot in. Using my hammer and chisel, I shaped a knob of metal (opposite the pronged end) into a square socket.

With that, I was done...almost.

"I'm finished shaping the head," I announced to Rike.

"Is there more you have to do?" she asked.

"I still have to quench and temper it."

The last two steps were part of the fundamental process of making bladed weapons and tools, and I performed them with a practiced hand.

The hiss of the metal hitting the water was like an old friend to me. I could feel the sensation of the metal cooling. When the time was right, I pulled the head of the hoe out of the water and held it over the fire to warm it up gently. Finally, I inserted the square pole that Lidy and Helen had cut for me and secured it by driving a slim wedge through the gap between the pole and the socket.

After that, I stepped outside. "I'm taking this guy on a test drive," I announced.

I walked over to the vegetable plot in the courtyard. Raising the hoe above my head, I drove it into the soil with vigor, putting my

back into the strike. The soil was hard outside the perimeter of our cultivated plot, and the force of the blow jarred my hand. Still, the hoe sunk deep into the earth.

“Here goes...nothing.” I pulled the hoe up sharply, carving out a large chunk of dirt. If I’d been using a flat-headed hoe, the soil might have been too hard. Clay-like soil would stick to the surface too, which would make the work difficult. However, dirt was less likely to cling onto a pronged hoe, so it was easier to plow with.

After a few strokes, my thirty-plus-year-old back started to feel the effects of the labor. In Japan, foot plows had been invented during the Taisho period, around the early twentieth century. With such an instrument, I would’ve been able to plow the soil while remaining standing.

I shouldered the hoe. “This should be good enough,” I mumbled, hammering my sore back with my fist. I turned back, heading into the house.

Chapter 6: Family Road Trip

I returned to the workshop and got started on the next hoe. Next to me, Rike began working as well.

Right now, we were blacksmithing in time trial mode. We'd lose a day tomorrow on the trip to the capital, but if we could complete ten hoes between the two of us, that should put us on the right track.

While Rike and I shaped the heads, Samya and the others rapidly churned out wooden handles and plate metal. Their work was less complex than ours, but their speed was mostly due to the improvement in their skills—compared to past projects, they were all slightly faster.

"Slightly" didn't sound very impressive, but once numbers were put to it, you got quite a different picture. In the time that they used to be able to make, let's say, ten swords, they could now make twelve, and what was fifty swords was now sixty. This increased pace was particularly vital when it came to bulk orders.

"You've all improved," I said, complimenting them earnestly.

"You mean it?!" Samya exclaimed with a delighted expression, her ears twitching.

"Yeah, I do. Right, Rike?"

Rike backed me up, saying, "Yes. Without a doubt."

"Sweet!" Samya cheered.

Her reaction was the most spirited; Diana and Lidy were pleased as well, but they kept it quieter.

Helen was...well, Helen. She had only just come to live with us, and we all knew that she would grow from here on out. There was no need to rush. When I said that to her, a fire lit in her eyes, and she nodded. Then, we both returned to our respective work.

By the end of the day, we had surpassed our goal of ten by one: I had made seven, and Rike, four.

"I just can't win against you, Boss," she lamented.

I grinned at her. "That's why I'm the boss. I'd be in a pickle if my apprentice surpassed me so quickly."

Rike was already impressive, considering that she was able to perform so well compared to my cheat-boosted speeds. However, I kept mum about that detail.

The next day, we set off for the capital. That said, we didn't have

anything special to prepare, so the morning felt exactly as if we were just going to the city.

Diana was a touch more dressed up than usual, but she was still in her everyday clothes. People from all walks of life mingled in the capital, so no one was going to be paying attention to our attire. Diana had clothing befitting her station for a variety of settings, but there was hardly any need to dust them off for a day of casual sightseeing around town.

For good measure, we loaded our self-defense weapons onto the cart. However, while inside the capital, we'd have to make do with our knives, which were the only everyday carry weapons we had. Hopefully it wouldn't matter—we had no intention of picking any unnecessary fights.

We were departing earlier than usual today. The sun had yet to rise, and the world was still a dusky gray. We hitched Krul up to the empty cart and climbed in (Diana helped Lucy up).

Rike grabbed hold of the reins and flicked them. Krul...didn't move. She turned and looked back at us instead.

Is she hesitating because we didn't load anything but ourselves?

"We're going empty-handed," I called to her. "But don't fret. In exchange, we'll be going on a longer ride."

Krul cooed, "*Kulu*," and dipped her head in a small nod.

"Maybe she thought we forgot the cargo," I mused.

Rike answered while steering, her tone appreciative, "Krul is a smart little lady."

I nodded. "She sure is."

In the forest, we primarily relied on Samya's senses of smell and hearing to alert us to any danger. She helped to route us around any wolves or ferocious beasts that we were in danger of crossing paths with. This part of the journey was no different from our city trips.

At one point, we came close to a herd of deer (but not close enough for me to see any), so we detoured around them, but otherwise it was smooth sailing.

Once on the road, we would be turning opposite the direction we normally traveled. I gave the order to Rike, and she tugged on the reins gently to pass the word to Krul. Though Krul hesitated for a split second, she soon complied.

We proceeded straight along the road, through the tableau of grassy plains and forest. The components of the scenery were unchanged from our regular trips into the city, but the view was mirrored.

"This is what I'm used to seeing on our way home," Samya commented. "It's bizarre to see it during sunrise."

"That's true," I replied.

I'd been to the capital several times before, so the landscape didn't look out of place to me, but this was probably Samya's first time. Had the scenery been completely different, it would've been easier to enjoy—it was precisely because the landscape was familiar that any little change caused a sense of disconnect.

Rike, of the same mind as Samya, *mmhmm*'d in agreement, but no one else seemed to have any idea what Samya was talking about. Lidy and Helen hadn't been with us long enough to get used to the scenery. Diana, on the other hand, was well-acquainted with both the city and the capital. Her family ruled over the former, and she had originally lived in the latter.

The sun climbed higher into the sky as we continued on our way, and the crimson-flushed world returned to its original colors once more. We rode across a canvas of blue and green bisected with a brown line.

The view was beautiful. If I had been artistically inclined, I would've been compelled to draw it. The day was clear—a good omen that the weather should hold. I was looking forward to spending a relaxing, trouble-free day as a family.

Krul led our procession to the capital. Thanks to the suspensions on the cart, the ride was relatively smooth, even when we were riding quickly; a normal cart at our speed would've been bouncing all over the place.

The downside of the suspensions was that we stood out. It was almost suspicious how level our cart sat, considering the speed at which we were traveling. Luckily, most people chalked it up to the fact that a drake was hauling the cart, a fact I was able to confirm after we gradually increased our speed while passing by several horse-drawn carts and travelers on foot.

A few people looked surprised or suspicious at first, but once they saw Krul at the end of the reins, their expressions morphed into ones of acceptance. Drakes were a rare sight to begin with, though at this point, there were quite a few people who would've seen Krul more than once. As long as no one scrutinized the cart itself, I'd be happy.

After riding for a while on the road, the mountain range encircling the capital became visible on the horizon. It looked as if it were another layer of defense, like an extra wall protecting the city.

I'd seen it several times before, but it was likely the first time for Samya. "Woow!" she exclaimed in admiration.

There were mountains near the Black Forest, but the trees blocked them from view. On the shore of the lake, you might spy something that could be the peak of the mountain...maybe.

"Now that we can see the mountains, the capital should be just a

little farther,” I said.

“Seriously?!” Samya yelled excitedly.

“Yeah, he’s right,” Diana cut in. Then, in a wistful tone, she added, “I haven’t been away for *that* long, but it feels like it’s been forever.”

Day trip or not, today could be considered a homecoming for Diana. I had no objection to her spending the whole day at the Eimoor estate if she so chose.

When I suggested it to Diana, she sighed and her voice grew pinched. “You’re kicking me out of the group?”

I backpedaled immediately in a panic. “No, no, that’s not what I ___”

“Ha ha, I know. I’m just teasing,” She chuckled, and the sound had a hint of mischief in it. We’d been living together for some time now, but her joyful expression still pierced my heart. It was the elegant smile of a beautiful young lady raised in a noble household.

“But,” she continued, “I would be sad if you left me behind.”

“I get it, I get it. We’ll explore the capital together,” I promised.

“Yes, please.” She smiled again, and it was just as blinding as it had been the first time. To prevent myself from being dazzled any further, I moved toward the driver’s seat, closer to Rike, and turned to face the front.

Thanks to Krul, we arrived at the entrance to the capital an hour or so earlier than expected. Originally, we’d planned to get there around noon.

In fact, it might be a little too early to be knocking at the Eimoor’s door, even if we have to wait to get into the capital. Were we going to have to find a place to kill time?

The folks waiting in front of the gate included travelers strapped with luggage and traveling merchants. I saw a flaxen-haired young woman geared with a sword and shield and a beastfolk carrying farming equipment who must’ve lived nearby. People of all backgrounds crowded in line, and we moved to join them (though Rike did the actual steering).

Suddenly, a familiar voice called my name and snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Master Eizo!”

Only one group of people addressed me as Master: the servants of the Eimoor household. I looked for the source of the voice and spied a servant who I was well-acquainted with.

“Catalina,” I said.

What a busy life she leads...

I’d had the same thought when she’d come to meet Helen and me

after we'd escaped from the empire.

She bowed deeply. "I have come to escort you to the house."

"That is very kind of you, but is it all right for us to be here so early?" I asked.

How long has she been waiting?

We'd arrived earlier than expected, but had we been traveling on an unmodified cart, she would've needed to wait another hour. Precise timekeeping devices had yet to come into common use in this world, so there was no way to convey accurate meeting times. If we had originally planned not to arrive until the afternoon, she would've had to wait a long time.

I might have to tell Marius to tone down his courtesy. His kindness actually added to our stress.

In response to my question, Catalina replied, "There is no need to worry. Everyone is already at the estate."

"That's a relief," I said. "Please, get on the cart with us."

"Thank you very much."

I helped pull Catalina up, and Lucy bounded over to her immediately, swishing her tail from side to side. Catalina's expression softened. "How adorable."

"Isn't she perfect?!" Mama Diana boasted, her chest puffed up with pride.

There was no question that Lucy was cute, but Diana was becoming more and more of a doting parent by the day... Actually, maybe it was already too late for her.

Samya heaved a sigh of resignation. I, unfortunately, knew all too well how she felt.

Catalina soon snapped out of the trance induced by Lucy's cuteness. "Please continue forward to the gate," she directed Rike.

"Are you sure?" Rike asked hesitantly, not sure whether it was acceptable to skip the line at the gate. Regardless, she relayed the command to Krul to start walking again.

"Yes. The residents in the capital—nobility in particular—receive special treatment," Catalina explained. Her tone was perfectly nonchalant, like she couldn't imagine why the nobility wouldn't be given different privileges.

I felt guilty for cutting the line ahead of the other travelers, but I was also grateful to have connections to lean on.

Once at the gate, Catalina took something out of her breast pocket and presented it to the guard. It must've been a token of passage issued to the Eimoors. The guard glanced at it and waved us forward with a salute.

Past the gate, we found ourselves on a wide road where people of all kinds were coming and going. I wasn't new to the bustle of the

capital, but the energy here still made my heart race with excitement.

Eyes glued to the crowds, Samya exclaimed, "Amazing!"

The city didn't have any roads this wide or crowds this large. Here, men and women, elderly and young, and people of all races mingled on the streets, in the middle of errands, hawking wares at street stalls, or simply standing around and chatting.

An enormous castle loomed in the distance; it resembled more of a fortress than something like the Neuschwanstein Castle from my previous world, and its imposing appearance was intended to be a display of the power and strength of the capital's ruler.

Diana and Helen were both nonchalant about the sights. Diana had originally lived here, and Helen would have visited from time to time. However, the others gawked at everything, awestruck.

Lidy was no exception to this—her eyes were sparkling as she remarked, "There are so many different kinds of people here."

Huh... I thought wryly. So says the elf, who is likely the rarest individual of all to be currently wandering the streets of the capital. I kept my mouth shut though and replied as casually as I could. "You'll hardly ever see a lizardman in the city."

"The giants are enormous," Rike said in awe. Though she was a full-fledged dwarf (I believed), she looked like a young girl. To her, the giants must've appeared even bigger than they did to the rest of us.

As we rode on, those seeing the capital for the first time stared out at the lively and diverse crowd with eyes the size of saucers—it was as if they'd been cast as country hicks on their first trip to the dazzling big city.

Lucy was just as enthralled by the new environment, her tail in constant motion as she zoomed from one side of the cart to the other, watching the scenery flow around us. Every time she popped her head over the edge of the cart, she inevitably ended up startling passersby, but their expressions usually softened once they had a moment to register her.

Had they found themselves face-to-face with a grown dog (or wolf), fear might have won out, but Lucy was still a tiny charming ball of fluff. Of course, plenty of people in this world were afraid of dogs, but the majority ended up losing to Lucy's cuteness. On our way to the estate, we left a trail of smitten pedestrians and shopkeepers in our wake, and the sight of everyone's mellow expressions left us in a good mood too.

When we arrived at the Eimoor residence, Catalina directed us to park in an area for guest carriages. We were about to unhitch Krul and help Lucy down from the cart, but before we could do so, the servants came out from the house to meet us.

A man with a gentle countenance was the first one to greet us. "Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Eimoor estate."

It was Bowman. His amiable manner was unchanged, but...was it just me, or had he gotten more muscular since I'd last seen him?

"Hello, Bowman," I said. "You didn't have to go out of your way to meet us."

"No, that would not do. An indecorous reception of our valuable guests would tarnish the Eimoor's good name," Bowman insisted.

"Unfortunately, the master is currently away, but please make yourselves at home. We are in charge of seeing to your comfort, so do not hesitate to ask for us."

"I thank you kindly for your hospitality," I replied.

The other servants welcomed us with jovial smiles as well.

Marius apparently wasn't home, but perhaps that was for the best. The kingdom would be in dire straits if counts were wandering around with nothing to do on a business-as-usual day.

Bowman continued, "More than anything, I am pleased to see that my lady is in good health."

"I, too, am happy that everyone's doing well," Diana said.

Several female servants swarmed around their mistress, clamoring with excitement. The same thing had happened the last time I'd been here. They all seemed to get along quite well. Diana introduced the servants to the women in our family—in other words, everyone besides me.

After that, Bowman turned to me. "We can hold any valuables for you here at the estate," he offered.

"Thank you. That would be a great help."

We kept an eye on the others as we brought the luggage into the residence. There wasn't much—only my katana and a few other weapons—so we finished quickly.

"It will soon be time for lunch, I believe," Bowman said. "Will you be taking your meals here?"

"No, we'd best get going. I apologize if you've already gone to the trouble of preparing something for us."

"Unfortunately, though it may be indecorous of us, I must confess that we did not prepare anything. The master said you would most likely be visiting the good cook in the outer city. There's no need to worry."

"That's good. I'm relieved," I said honestly, not trying to hide my feelings.

I really should have contacted Marius properly beforehand. A whole meal could've gone to waste! I was saved by Marius's diligence this time, but I resolved to be more careful in the future.

I looked at the others and saw that they were still chatting.

“Heeey! Time to go!” I called out. They were probably reluctant to leave, but I’d prefer to wrap up our errands quickly and come back afterward. That way, they could spend as much time talking as they wanted.

The others agreed, and we took our leave of the Eimoor estate. On our way out, I looked back to see Catalina waving at us with Lucy snuggled in her arms.

Adventure in the capital, here we come!

First things first, we had to fill our empty stomachs. We made our way through the inner city, which was fairly uncrowded since it was the nobles’ residential district.

At my request, Diana led the group as our guide. She was roughly familiar with the outer city, and when I had asked her about Sandro’s restaurant, she’d said that she had an idea of where it was.

Why she knew her way around the outer city was a secret, but judging by Bowman’s wry smile when the topic had come up, my guess was that she’d snuck out with her brothers as kids.

Diana weaved her way through the streets with no hesitation and we followed after her. Soon, we found ourselves in front of the gate separating the inner and outer rings of the city. If the city were ever in crisis, the inner gate (as well as the outer gate, of course) could be shut to protect the inner city.

The buildings connected to the gate were taller than the others around it, and they served as guard rooms and lookout points. When I peered up, I could see guards on top of the building who looked busy surveilling the surroundings.

Diana showed the passage token to the guard. He saluted, and we walked through.

We’d have to present the same one again on our way back. If it were stolen, we *could* have someone from the Eimoor household pick us up (as long as we didn’t return too late). However, I hoped we wouldn’t have to resort to that.

On the other side of the inner gate, we were immediately swallowed up by a wave of sound. Since we regularly traveled into the city (where crowds congregated) and because we’d passed through this section of the capital once already on the way to the Eimoors, the noise didn’t shock anyone. However, this particular crowd was much more diverse and several times larger than the ones we’d usually encounter in the city. Someone afraid of crowds might get dizzy at the sight.

Diana set a brisk pace, leading us through the throngs of people. It was, however, a bit too fast—Samya, Rike, and Lidy (the three inexperienced with crowds) were in danger of losing their way, even if

Helen and I (with my experience from my last life) would be fine. I was about to warn Diana when she slowed her steps; we must've been on the same wavelength.

I turned to the three newbies. "Make sure you stay with us," I cautioned, and they all packed in closer.

All of us moved down the street in a tight group—we were a party of six with me as the lone male...and the lone geezer at that. Half of us were human, but the other half represented all different races. One of us was even an elf.

Luckily, no one tried to make a pass at Lidy. Maybe elves were too extraordinary to even dream of laying a hand on, or maybe Helen's sharp glare was keeping all the flies away. If anyone tried to start trouble with us, I'd be forced to demonstrate just how sharp my knife was. Ideally, that was a situation I wanted to avoid.

I kept an eye on the people around us, slightly on edge, but we made it to pops's restaurant without trouble. The sign declared the restaurant to be The Gold-Tusked Boar, and true to its name, there was a carving of a boar with tusks inlaid with gold—or possibly brass—decorating the front. The boar's features were different from the ones that lived in the Black Forest. Perhaps it was a different species.

Light streamed in through the open door, and we stepped inside.

"Welcome!" a young waitress said brightly. She was wearing a plain shirt and skirt with an apron tied around her waist. "The table over there is open."

"Thanks," I replied, and we made ourselves over to the table she had gestured to.

Once we were seated, I started thinking out loud. "Hmmm, what to order? What to order? Are there any dishes the capital's famous for?"

"Let me think," Diana said. "Well, in the outer districts, the lamb stew is known to be delicious."

"Yum. That sounds good." Even if the meat had a bite to it, the stew would still pair well with a side of bread or vegetables.

You know what, I'll leave the course selection to the pros.

Just then, a familiar voice interrupted my thoughts about my order. "Huh? Could that be Master Eizo I see?"

"Boris!" I called out. "How've you been?"

"Eh, what can I say?" He shrugged. "Been on the wrong side of pops's temper one too many times, but otherwise, can't complain." Boris and I both broke out laughing.

"Oh, this is my family," I said, introducing the others sitting at the table with me.

Boris whistled. "Well, well...someone's Mr. Popular."

"They're not my wives, if that's what you're thinking."

“Sure, sure,” he said dismissively. He clearly didn’t believe a word I said. “Ah, I’ll go grab pops.” He headed to the back, shouting, “Pops!”

After a moment, we heard a holler loud enough to bring down the roof. “What’d ya say?! Eizo’s here?!”

Before I knew it, I was chuckling.

Good ol’ pops.

Footsteps pounded toward us—the floor felt as if it were shaking—and out stomped a stout, muscular, middle-aged man. This was Sandro, the head of the restaurant.

“One of my brethren?” Rike asked, taken aback.

I could see how she’d come to that conclusion...but pops was human from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes. Maybe, just maybe, he had a dwarven ancestor somewhere far, far back in his family tree... Were those dwarven genes making a reappearance after skipping a few generations?

“Good to see you, pops,” I said. “We had some business in the capital and decided to make a pit stop.”

“Huh? What’d ya mean ‘pit stop’?!” he demanded.

“Kidding, just kidding. Visiting you was one of the goals of this trip. I promised, didn’t I?” Though it wasn’t our primary objective, I had been looking forward to this part of the itinerary.

“Good man!” he bellowed. “And are these lovely ladies your sweethearts?”

“They’re my family, but we’re not married. Didn’t I tell you that before?” I chided.

“Did you? Well, what a lovely garden of flowers you’ve brought with you! I didn’t take you to be such a stud, Eizo.” Pops guffawed, shaking with mirth.

On the other hand, the gazes of my family had turned ice cold, and I hurried to change the subject. “A-Anyway, that’s why we’re here. Anything you recommend? Can you make it for us?”

“Who do you take me for? Leave it to me!” He flexed his biceps—with those guns, it was hard to believe he was a chef—and returned to the kitchen.

In no time, pops had assaulted us with a barrage of delicious dishes. Had we not put a stop to it, he probably would’ve continued sending out dish after dish until the end of time.

He brought out the aforementioned lamb stew, a sweet and spicy grilled beef, a warm salad of poached vegetables with a tart dressing, curry-flavored grilled pork, and a grilled chicken seasoned with herbs. The feast came with a side of rye bread and vegetable soup.

The menu was lavish for your friendly neighborhood eatery, and every single dish tasted exquisite. Pops really was on top of his game.

But...it was a little too much.

Thank the gods Rike and Helen were with us—they both ate more than the average woman, even though they were so slim. It was a mystery where all the food went.

“Boar and venison are good, but beef, lamb, and chicken are tasty too, aren’t they?” I asked.

“Shall we raise some?” Rike asked.

“No... Considering where we live...”

I couldn’t imagine raising cows or sheep in the Black Forest. There was plenty of grass for them to graze on, but there wasn’t enough space for them to roam. We could bring them out of the forest to the road every day, but that would take so much time that we’d have to give up blacksmithing...which would defeat the whole purpose.

We could keep chickens as long as we had a coop, and then we’d be able to get fresh eggs. The thought was certainly tempting, but it wouldn’t be easy to manage them. If they wandered away from the house, they might get snapped up by wolves as a tasty treat. It just didn’t seem feasible.

“To think that there’s such a good restaurant in the outer city,” Diana said appreciatively. “You know everyone, Eizo.”

There was no doubt that the cook trio’s skills were top notch if they were able to satisfy the taste buds of a young noble lady. Business seemed to be flourishing. New customers, locals, and travelers alike had been coming in a constant stream. Hums of appreciation and the low drum of compliments from the seated diners filled the air.

However...

“I met pops when I joined the expedition as support, but he was Marius’s acquaintance first,” I corrected Diana.

She looked surprised. “What?”

That’s right. Your brother’s the one who knew pops first—not me. I didn’t know anyone in the capital besides the people in your household and the margrave before I went on that expedition.

“My guess is that he stumbled on this place after sneaking out of the house and took a shine to it. No?”

“That sounds like something my brother would do...” Diana admitted.

Are you serious? Is the Eimoor family going to be all right?

Granted, Marius had been the third son up until recently, so he’d likely been able to enjoy a little more freedom. Plus, he had a sister that was familiar with this area, so there’d been no reason to worry.

I guess you could excuse his behavior that way...

We cleaned off our plates, and after giving ourselves a moment to digest, we decided to move on. The restaurant was bustling, and there

were other hungry customers to fill our seats. I flagged the waitress to ask for the bill.

The waitress who had welcomed us to the restaurant came over, but she informed us, "Pops says you don't need to pay."

I wonder if she's Sandro's daughter?

"Huh? W-Wait, but..." I stuttered. We'd eaten a truckload of food. How could we possibly leave without paying? It would hurt my conscience.

"It's payment for the maintenance on the knives," she said. "And he told me that if you try to pay, I should get Boris to kick you out."

Pops had seen right through me. At some point, Boris had come out to stand behind the young waitress. He was flexing and showing off a set of bulging muscles that rivaled pops's. In fact, the waitress herself might've been just as well-built, but it was hard to tell because of her clothing.

Regardless, I had my cheats, Helen was the strongest mercenary in the region, and Diana was a talented swordsman who'd leveled up under our tutelage. On top of that, we even had a beastfolk accompanying us. From a combat perspective, it was obvious that we had the upper hand, but we didn't want to hurt them, nor them us. Besides, there was hardly a reason to go as far as to start a fight to refuse pops's generosity.

"Well...I suppose," I agreed reluctantly. "Thanks for the treat, pops! Appreciate it!" I called out.

He yelled back in a thunderous voice, "Pleasure! Come again! If you don't, I'm gonna send you flying."

If we didn't visit, he wouldn't be able to touch a hair on my head, let alone send me flying, but I couldn't help but smile at the very pops-like reply.

The six of us left the restaurant and hit the streets again. Now that it was later in the day, the crowd had gotten denser, so we braced ourselves and kept an eye out for pickpockets. With Helen, Diana, and I on the lookout, I didn't expect anything to happen. Helen kept a hand resting casually on her weapon while she exuded a slightly menacing atmosphere.

No one was going to be making a half-hearted pass at us. In fact, the crowd gave our party a slight berth. Just what I would expect of a renowned mercenary.

Suddenly, Helen turned to me. "You see them?" she whispered in a barely audible voice.

"Yeah," I replied. "Three people."

She whistled quietly. "I'm impressed. I figured you'd catch on to two but not all three."

Helen was referring to the number of lowlives who'd marked us as their target. Well, not *us*, per se. Their goal was likely to abduct Lidy. Tiger-type beastfolk weren't so rare and neither were dwarves. Diana was a beauty, but she wouldn't be worth the risk of engaging two expert fighters, at least not in the modest outfit she was wearing.

But Lidy was a different story. An elf could fetch the kidnappers a killing in one fell swoop.

Lidy was part of the family, so of course we couldn't have possibly left her at home. Next time, however, I'd make sure to get her a disguise. I should've thought of that before we came to the capital, but since we'd never encountered any trouble like this over in the city, I'd been lulled into a false sense of security. This situation was my fault.

Out of our three pursuers, two of them were easy to pick out, but the remaining one was moderately proficient, slipping in and out of the crowd seamlessly. I said "moderately" because he was still foolhardy enough to follow through with an abduction despite the risk, so I didn't put too much stock in his skills. Their cover was already blown.

However, they probably weren't your average hoodlums—after all, they were confident that they could get away with exchanging an elf for money, despite the fact that elves stood out and were thus easier to trace.

"What do you want to do, Eizo?" Helen asked.

"Can we throw them off?"

"Hm... Might be tough," she responded. "We're a pretty large party."

I would've preferred giving them the slip, but it looked like we would have no choice but to face them.

"There's less foot traffic up ahead, right?" I asked Diana.

She nodded without speaking.

"We'll confront them there," I decided.

This time, Helen was the one to nod.

We kept vigilant as we headed in the direction of the trinket shop we'd been planning to visit. The store in question was upscale for the outer city, but shabby compared to the ones in the inner city. I had decided against patronizing a shop in the inner city because reproducing the lavish designs popular with the aristocracy would be trickier. Also, I had doubts about wearing such expensive trinkets all the time.

On the other hand, I didn't want anything that was *too* easily procured either. Somewhere in the middle was ideal. Whether we could find a trinket that hit on the perfect balance was another question.

This district of the capital was full of shops with wares that your

average citizen in the outer city wouldn't be able to buy in large amounts; they also weren't the kind of shops that nobility would frequent. Because of this, there was comparatively less traffic here, but there was still a crowd—a petty crook could easily slip in and sidle up to their prey.

As we made our way through the streets, our three pursuers slowly closed the distance. Judging by their movements, it seemed that the plan was for two of them to act as distractions while the third one went in for the kill...at least, that was my guess.

Helen, Diana, and I exchanged glances and nods. As a group, we quickly ducked around a corner where there were even fewer pedestrians. Our stalkers came after us in a hurry.

As they strode toward us, I quickly blocked their way. "You must know we're onto you," I called out. "What are you going to do? If you turn around now, I promise we'll let you go."

I decided to overlook their actions if they ran (I was sure their list of other crimes was pages long, but this and that were separate matters). Otherwise, we'd do what we had to do.

Honestly, the victor had been decided the moment we spotted them. I hoped they would flee, but...

Tension filled the air. The three crooks hesitated. Their failure to make a decision at a critical moment like this was another strike against them. I flashed the knife I'd unsheathed and observed our opponents' reactions.

"We have three skilled fighters in our party, and a dwarf and a beastfolk. The elven lady can use magic as well." My voice conveyed the threat, but I was half bluffing.

Rike only knew enough combat for self-defense, and Samya had good reflexes, but she wasn't good at close quarters combat. While it was true that Lidy could use magic, the concentration of magical essence in the capital was sparse, so her hands might've been tied on that front.

That being said, Lightning Strike Helen was with us, even if the wig made her look like a different person, and a second swordsman who could compete with her (me) was here too. The two of us alone would've been enough, but Diana, too, was strong enough that she wasn't going to lose against any small-time crooks; she'd been trained under Helen's spartan tutelage, so she was sure to win against all but top-tier fighters.

In other words, it had been game over for our pursuers the moment we noticed them trailing us. The question was whether they'd realized that they stood no chance.

After a tense moment, the three pursuers backed away slowly. That was right. They knew they were done for, so the correct

choice was to run.

Once out of combat range of our party, they beat a hasty retreat.

"We won't let you off a second time!" I yelled after them.

Standoff over. We'd won.

However, there was no telling whether a second group of thugs was waiting in the shadows for us to drop our guards after the victory, so we stayed cautious as we walked to our destination.

Along the way, Rike said, "That gave me a scare."

"Me too," Lidy agreed.

As for Samya, she was perceptive as long as she could sniff out any enemies, but there were too many people here for her to rely on her sense of smell.

"Don't worry," I assured them. "Like I said, you've got the three of us swordsmen and a strong beastfolk as bodyguards. Even the nobles wish they were as secure as you two." I kept my tone light and joking in hopes that I could relieve them of any lingering anxiety.

Lidy smiled softly. "It reminded me of that time in the forest."

She must be talking about the time I escorted her through the caves.

"What forest?" Helen asked, nonplussed.

"Aaah, see, the reason Lidy came to live with us was..."

As we walked, I told Helen the whole story. By the time we arrived at the store, she was wide-eyed, engrossed in the tale I was weaving.

She must like these kinds of stories. Next time, I'll have to tell her about how I took down the bear.

"We're here," Diana announced.

The shop before her was impressive. There was no display window—there wouldn't be, in this era—but it still reminded me of the jewelry stores from my previous world.

It's hardly a revelation that they're alike, considering that they have the same kind of inventory.

Inside, there were several counters upon which ornate accessories of all kinds were arranged. Gold and silver gleamed from every corner of the shop.

The golden-colored accessories at a lower price point were made of brass or another kind of metal. The ones in a middling price range were gold-plated, and the most expensive items were made of a less pure gold. I didn't see anything that was 24K gold, but there weren't likely to be many guests who could afford pure gold jewelry anyway. Maybe this shop didn't stock any at all.

The price of the silver pieces varied as well depending on the purity of the metal and the design. In general, the more elaborate the piece, the more time it took to make, and the higher the price. I learned all of this through my cheats. Jewelry-making fell under

production and was at least tangentially related to blacksmithing.

The members of our family who'd never stepped foot in this kind of store—that was, everyone besides Diana and me (if you included my previous world experience)—were gaping in astonishment. The words “I can’t believe what I’m seeing!” were written plainly on their faces.

“Take a look around and find something that looks good,” I told everyone.

“You say that, but I don’t even know where to start,” Samya retorted. And...fair enough. Samya wore clips in her hair, but otherwise, she went unadorned. Necklaces and other jewelry tended to snag in inconvenient places.

Diana puffed up her chest with pride. “Leave it to me. I’ll pick something out for everyone.” She was born into the nobility—we were in capable hands.

I was already past my prime on the outside, and on the inside, I was well into my middle-aged life. I had no sense at all when it came to jewelry. That being said, I didn’t want to be disregarded as a dad accompanying his daughters on a weekend shopping trip either.

I focused, preparing to help however I could. *Who knew choosing jewelry would take more resolve than watching for crooks?*

Diana picked her way around the store—the first person she found a trinket for was Samya.

“Wh-What do you think?” Samya asked me, sounding uncharacteristically shy. She was wearing a gold necklace crafted to look like intertwined branches. I’d thought Diana would pick a more wild design—for example, something with fangs—so I was surprised by how subdued the necklace was.

Not that it didn’t suit Samya, of course. In fact, it brought out her innate charm and lovability (though, the person in question would probably rather be thought of as more fierce than cute). The necklace also matched the green hair accessories that Samya normally wore, and the gold wasn’t gaudy either; the color matched Samya’s hair, which was also golden (or, rather, tiger-striped).

“It looks good on you,” I told Samya honestly.

Her cheeks blushed even more red, and she fidgeted restlessly, unused to such compliments.

Rike was next. For her, Diana chose a rough-hewn silver pendant inlaid with a red jewel. Overall, it was a simple design.

“The fire of the forge, eh?” I remarked.

Diana responded for Rike. “Yes, that’s right.”

The small jewel sparkling in the light resembled a dancing flame. It was a good choice for Rike.

Today, Rike was wearing a subdued outfit that showed less skin

than usual (the forge was hot, so she normally wore light clothing). The pendant acted as the perfect centerpiece.

"It suits you, Rike," I said.

Rike grinned broadly and gave a small chuckle. "Thank you." She looked bashful, but only slightly. Of everyone in the family, she received the most compliments from me; I regularly praised her smithing abilities.

Honestly, if they all reacted like shrinking violets when I complimented them, my own embarrassment meter was sure to fill up first, at which point I would jettison myself out of the store.

"This one is for Lidy," Diana continued.

"Wow," I said.

Her necklace was similar to Samya's, but it was silver, which might have been an intentional choice to complement her silver hair. The pendant was around the same size as Rike's, but at its heart, there sparkled a green gem instead of a red one. The necklace looked as if someone had mixed together Samya and Rike's jewelry pieces, split it down the middle, and sprinkled in some extra flavoring that suited Lidy.

Did Diana choose it to represent the forest?

"It evokes the image of the spirit of the forest," I said, voicing my thoughts.

Lidy didn't respond, but she beat me softly on the chest with her fists. Unlike *a certain someone's* punches, they didn't hurt at all. Either she was holding back, or she had less physical strength compared to the others. I suspected it was the latter, but I planned to keep that to myself.

When it was Helen's turn, she mumbled, "You can skip me..." Her voice was as soft as the buzz of a mosquito's wings.

But Diana immediately protested. "What are you saying? I said I'd pick something out for everyone in the family, didn't I?"

For Helen, Diana selected an ear cuff—it was decorated with a red jewel slightly larger than the one in Rike's pendant. The cuff suited Helen even in her wig with its different coloring, but it would pair even better with her red hair.

Diana's sense of aesthetics was certainly impressive. She'd chosen something that went well with not only Helen's current hair color but her actual color as well.

"Whoa, not bad at all," I said in approval.

Embarrassed, Helen lashed out with a round of punches, her fists whistling through the air. Somehow, I managed to fend her attacks off with my palms. The slap of her hands hitting mine rang out in the room, and the impact made my hands go numb.

How much of her strength is she using?

I flapped my hands to get my blood circulating again, then continued. "The way it shines is eye-catching, so it might be best to avoid wearing it while you're out in the field, but it's cute. It's a good everyday piece."

All I had done was give my honest opinion, but Helen still geared up to unleash another flurry of punches my way. This time, I put a stop to that right away.

Thwarted, Helen whispered instead, as quiet as she'd been earlier, "Th-Thanks."

I thought to myself, *That was a much more devastating attack than her fists...*

"So what did you pick for yourself, Diana?" I asked.

She looked up at me, staring blankly. "Me?"

I nodded. "That's right. You. We can't wait to see what you picked." The others all nodded eagerly. "Our taste isn't good enough to choose something for you, so unfortunately, you'll have to decide for yourself."

"Hmmm." She paused for a moment to think. "Come with me, Eizo."

"You want me to...?" I asked.

This time, it was Diana's turn to nod. "It's not as fun if I'm showing everyone something I chose for myself!"

"Not fun indeed..." I echoed.

"So you see what I mean," she replied with a sweet smile.

I scratched my head as the two of us approached the display shelves.

Let's see...something pretty. I can tell the difference between a good and bad design to some extent, but I don't know what would suit Diana. I can also tell which pieces are well-made...from the perspective of a blacksmith, at least.

But craftsmanship wasn't the most important aspect of this selection. Even jewelry made by a master craftsman whose hands were lauded as the Hands of the Gods would be no better than dirt if it didn't look good on Diana.

After selecting a simple necklace, Diana held it up to her throat. "Then...how about this?"

The beauty of the necklace was set off by her clothes and hair. Her outfit today was a tad more ornate than usual, but you still wouldn't be able to tell that she was the young lady of a noble house just by looking.

"Looks good on you," I said, offering a line straight out of the father-along-on-a-shopping-trip playbook.

"Are you even looking?" huffed Diana.

I was panicking a little internally, but I rushed to defend myself. "I

am, I am. And my conclusion was that it suits you, so that's what I said."

Diana's expression smoothed out again.

I overheard Samya whisper to Rike. "Pssst, hey."

"What is it?" Rike replied.

"Don't you think they're acting exactly like a married couple?"

"Yup."

La la la! I'm not listening!

Diana then threw a question at me. "What would you pick, Eizo?"

I groaned. "Why do you always ask such impossible things of me?" However, I still gave the question proper thought, bringing a hand up to stroke my chin.

I like the clean and classic cut of the piece Diana chose, but—

A necklace jumped out at me.

—the larger blue gem on this one would look perfect on her!

I gestured at the necklace that had caught my eye. "What do you think about that?"

Diana lifted it and held it up to her chest.

"It suits you," I told her.

"Help me put it on."

I hesitated. "But..."

Diana ignored my protest and spun around, turning her back toward me. The clasp of the necklace wasn't a lobster claw or spring ring, but rather, a simple hook. I walked up to her slowly and brought my hand to her nape, resisting the urge to say, "Pardon me."



When I draped the necklace around Diana's throat, she twitched, but my hand held steady and I fastened the hook.

Diana spun around to the others, modeling the necklace. "How does it look?"

"Wow, it's killer!" Samya exclaimed, looking enthused.

"Boss chose well," added Rike.

Lidy nodded enthusiastically without saying anything.

"I'm a little jealous..." Helen muttered at the end.

I was glad everyone approved. Had they all agreed that my taste was lame, it'd probably take me three days to get over the shock.

"Good! Let's buy them then." I turned toward the shop's staff and called out, "Excuse me! We'll take everything."

"WHAAAT?!" the others all cried in unison.

The shop employees looked taken aback too. Had they not expected us to buy anything?

I suppose we don't exactly look wealthy...

"It'd be rude to leave empty-handed, don't you think?" I said.

"Plus, it wouldn't make sense to only buy something for one person either. If it bothers you, just think of it as payment for all your work at the forge."

We can make a trinket for all of us to carry around later, but that was that and this is this.

"Then it's settled," I declared. "How much?" I asked one of the shopkeepers, rushing through the purchasing process before the others could protest any further. One of the employees tallied up the total, beaming happily all the while.

The sum was no small amount, but we had enough saved up that it wasn't a big deal...I was pretty sure. There was still plenty of money left at home, even after I'd taken some for the trip today.

Once the transaction had been settled, the employees lined up and bowed all together. "Thank you for your patronage!"

It felt odd to be treated with such decorum. We had dressed up slightly for this trip, but our clothes were still nothing special. But, in any case, it was always nice to feel appreciated.

Having made our purchases, we left the jewelry store.

The six of us rejoined the crowds on the major thoroughfares. We kept an eye out just in case—it wouldn't be ideal to run into riffraff twice in one day.

However, when I asked Diana for her opinion on the likelihood of a second encounter, she said, "I've never heard of anything like that happening before."

But...how much of the news about crimes in the city would reach the ear of a noblewoman in the first place?

Once word about the failed ambush spread, it would make other criminals think twice about trying anything on us. In that sense, we could relax our guard a little.

I soon realized that we'd finished what we'd come to do earlier than planned, but it was too early to go home.

Should we hurry back to the Eimoor estate, or should we wander the streets for a while? We're heading in the direction of the inner city, but we already came all the way to the outer city. Wouldn't it be better to browse a few other shops?

As I contemplated what to do, Diana interrupted my thoughts and asked, "Worried about something?"

She'd been in a good mood all day since coming to the capital. *Maybe we should make this a monthly trip.* Though, that would mean we'd be imposing on the Eimoors more frequently...

"Nothing like that," I answered. "Just wondering if we should stop by some of the other stores."

"I see. Well, why not?"

We'd left Krul and Lucy at the Eimoor house, so going back straight away was certainly an option. Since the concentration of magic was lower in the capital, I was worried about Krul too—after all, magic, not food, was her primary source of nourishment. As long as Krul remained in a low-magic environment, she would have to eat to replenish her energy. She was going to grow hungrier and hungrier if she stayed too long.

I'll have to get permission from Mama Diana... But before that, I should check in with Lidy.

"How are you doing?" I asked her. "Your head doesn't hurt or anything, right?"

"No, we haven't been here for very long, so I'm fine," Lidy answered with a soft smile.

Elves like Lidy had to replenish their magical supply periodically, but apparently, they could go without for a few days' time. I hadn't asked whether elves also grew hungrier over time the way Krul did because I was afraid to hear the answer.

Elves needed magic because "that's just the way it works," but magical intake also played a large part in their long lifespans. Magic must prevent their cells from aging or something like that.

Even if Lidy could technically survive in the city for several days, I figured she might experience side effects like headaches or lethargy. I was ready to rush home at the first sign of any such symptoms, but she seemed to be in good shape.

In that case, shall we take a look at the street stalls? As long as no one else is tired.

I turned to the rest of the gang. "Everyone doing okay? We've

checked off everything on the list, so we can go straight home if the crowds are getting to be too much.”

“Works for me,” Samya replied.

“Same here,” said Rike.

“Me too,” Helen answered at the end.

Looks like we're good to go. We're already here, so we might as well check out what the city has to offer.

“Great, then let’s take a look around the shops,” I suggested. “Let me know if you see anything you want to buy, and I’ll pay for it.”

Everyone agreed, and we turned in a direction where street stalls were gathered in greater numbers. With an increase in shops came an increase in foot traffic, which required us to pay more attention to our surroundings. Nonetheless, at this point, I couldn’t see anything suspicious.

We did attract attention, however. Rare races like giants and lizardmen walked the streets in the capital in relatively large numbers, but it was almost unheard of to encounter an elf like Lidy. Therefore, it wasn’t strange at all that we drew the eyes of the crowd as we meandered from stall to stall.

There were fewer food stalls than I’d expected. We stopped by a bread stand to buy some soft, sweet rolls as a snack. I took the opportunity to ask the vendor about the lack of food stalls and was told that “It’s hard to get a stove to cook hot meals in a stall. Working them is mighty difficult as well.”

Come to think of it, the bread sold in the booth seemed to have been baked somewhere else beforehand. Perhaps the shopkeepers borrowed some ovens from a bakery that had a few free in the early morning—if so, they could bake their goods there before bringing them out here to the stall.

I hope I don't look like a servant waiting on his mistresses, I thought nervously, and my skin broke out in a cold sweat as we wandered around. Eventually, we stumbled upon an unusual stall dealing in paper goods.

The shopkeeper and a short woman were in the middle of a negotiation.

“Won’t you lower the price a little more?” urged the woman.

“These goods you see here are already at a discount!” the owner protested. “The kingdom wouldn’t take them, but I can’t sell them for any less.”

It seemed that the woman was looking to buy some paper, but the price was out of her range. I took a peek at the paper in question. They were indeed fairly high-quality sheets. Bargaining the price down looked difficult.

I came up behind the pair and said, “I’ll pay for it.”

The shorter woman jumped and turned around. Her expression morphed into one of surprise. "Master Eizo!"

"Miss Frederica, it has been a while."

"What brings you here to the capital?"

"I'm here to make some purchases for the family," I explained.

"We have a project in the works, and I was looking to find inspiration here, something to use as a model."

Frederica had yet to recover from her shock. Her squirrel-like cuteness was as heartwarming as always.

"Eizo's gone and hooked another one," Samya muttered, her tone completely fed up.

This is all a big misunderstanding!

"This is Miss Frederica," I explained. "We worked together during the monster-hunting expedition. You remember her, right, Lidy?"

Lidy dipped her head silently.

Thank goodness I have a witness.

Then Lidy opened her mouth and said, "She's the one you used to pat on the head, no?"

The temperature in our immediate surroundings plunged.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire...

Rike and Samya were one thing, but Diana and, for some reason, Helen, were glaring daggers at me. I swore I could feel her razor sharp gaze slicing into my forehead.

"That was just... She worked really hard, and I was impressed and..." I was finding it difficult to string a coherent sentence together, but I didn't try to hide anything. I'd really had no ulterior motives.

Lidy laughed at my flustered expression. "I know that. I just wanted to tease you a little," she admitted.

"R-Right..." I was relieved. The piercing gazes disappeared as well...for the time being.

I'd managed to clear that mix-up (or I decided to believe I had), but now Frederica was looking at us with a wistful gaze. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, I was just thinking that Count Eimoor was correct," Frederica said. "Your wives are very beautiful."

First Camilo and now Marius too. Was it okay for him to spread such rumors when his little sister was staying with me? Although, considering his personality, he would definitely make sure it didn't become a problem.

In the meantime, I explained to Frederica, "We're not married, though we *are* family."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I have no plans to take a bride."

I'd just straightened up my family's misconceptions about my

relationship with Frederica. Now, I had to dissuade Frederica of her assumptions about my family.

But, my words only had the effect of displeasing several of my family members.

I sighed and tacked on, "Not at the moment..."

I'm such a coward.

The tension in the air disappeared, and the atmosphere warmed. Up until a second ago, it felt like I'd stepped onto the battlefield between two master swordsmen.

"I understand now," Frederica said.

"Ah, sir, please excuse us," I said, apologizing to the shopkeeper for all the ruckus; he'd witnessed the entire exchange from start to end and had turned pale. I returned to the task at hand. "I'd like to purchase this sheaf of paper."

I took a silver coin from my pocket and passed it over. At times like this, it was best to pay quickly.

"No, I can't let you do that," Frederica protested. Just as I'd expected. However, both the owner and I ignored her and completed the transaction. I didn't try to bargain the price down, just chalked it up to an inconvenience fee for causing a commotion in front of the stand.

"Here you are," I said to Frederica. "We don't normally use paper at home anyway."

"Well...thank you very much," she replied, taking the paper from me somewhat reluctantly. But what choice did she have? I'd already paid, and we really didn't have any need for it. Frederica stored the paper away in her rucksack.

"A squirrel..." Samya mumbled.

I wasn't sure if she had meant for us to hear, but I gave one big internal nod of agreement.

That's right. No matter how you look at it, she perfectly resembles a squirrel stashing an acorn in the hollow of a tree.

Those of us who had a soft spot for cute things were watching Frederica with eyes aglow. At this rate, that *certain someone* was going to demand we take Frederica home with us.

"Miss Frederica, do you have the day off?" I asked.

"No, I'm just taking a break," she explained. "Work isn't so hectic today, so I can take a more leisurely break than usual."

She seemed to have a fair degree of control over her own schedule. Maybe she worked on a quota system, and she was free to do whatever she liked as long as she met it.

It would've been a waste to part ways so soon, so Frederica joined up with our group. The seven of us walked around, browsing the booths together. There were a few stalls selling jewelry, but the pieces

were considerably simpler compared to the ones in the store we'd visited earlier.

Some stands had blades on display too, but...well, it was easy to guess what their quality was like. However, they *were* accordingly cheap.

As long as Forge Eizo's products can stand apart from the common street wares... Though, my exceptional skills came from my cheats, so who was I to talk badly about the work of other smiths?

Frederica accompanied us for a while longer, but since she had to return to work, we eventually had to say goodbye. I had a feeling, though, that we'd meet somewhere again.

Frederica bowed to me. "Thank you for the paper."

"Don't mention it. Until next time."

We all waved and watched her walk away.

All right, it's about time for us to head home too.

We'd had an encounter with an unexpected person in an unexpected place. Now that we were finished browsing the stalls, we turned in the direction of the inner city—in other words, back to the Eimoor residence.

As we walked, I voiced the worry that'd been nagging at me. "I hope that Krul and Lucy aren't upset."

"They're both good, understanding kids," Diana said. "They'll be fine, I think."

If Mama Diana says so, it must be true.

However, she didn't stop there. "Though, I do wonder if they're hungry by now."

I buried my face in my hands. "That's the other issue..."

We'd left some of Lucy's food with Catalina, but I was slightly concerned about whether Krul would have enough to keep satiated, considering her special diet.

"Well, there's no use fretting about it here," I decided. "Let's hurry back."

The other five agreed, and we continued on toward the inner city with Diana in the lead.

At the inner gate, Diana once again brought out the wooden token she'd shown the guard on our way out. The guards had rotated shifts while we were taking care of business, but we had no problems this time around either. We bowed back at the guard as we passed.

Once we were through the gate, I edged closer to Helen and told her in a low voice, "Thanks for watching our backs."

Helen had been keeping an eye on our surroundings (mainly behind us) the whole time we were roaming the streets of the outer city. Since we had returned to the district where the aristocracy lived,

there was no more need to stay hypervigilant. I used this timing to thank Helen—she would be able to take it easy from now on.

It was important to show your appreciation when someone, even a family member, helped you out. That was one of the very reasons I had planned this day trip in the first place.

Helen turned red at my thanks and mustered all her energy to stutter out, “S-Sure.”

The inner city streets were a touch too lively to be called quiet. Lidy still drew attention from passersby as we walked through the streets, but compared to the outer districts, people gawked at her less...at least openly. Perhaps that was only to be expected of the upper class.

Now that we had returned to Diana’s home territory, we increased our pace. Of course, our desire to return to Krul and Lucy even a second earlier was a large part of why we were rushing.

At the gate to the Eimoor residence, we exchanged greetings with the two guards on duty. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but both guards were equipped with halberds, likely the ones purchased from our forge. The weapons made a formidable combo with the guards’ metal armor, and I thought they would make for an effective scare tactic...not that I expected many people who weren’t nobles to be coming around these parts.

All of us, except for Diana, bowed to the guards as we entered the grounds. When we went around to the back garden where we’d said goodbye to Krul and Lucy, our little pup came dashing toward us, barking an energetic, “*Arf!*” From the way her tail was wagging furiously, I could tell she was all right.

Krul cooed and ambled up to receive pets from Helen and Rike.

“Did these little rascals give you any trouble?” I asked Catalina.

She shook her head and waved her hand. “Not even a little. They were perfectly well behaved.”

I was relieved to hear her response.

“However...” Catalina continued, “Krul here is quite the voracious eater.”

“You fed her? I appreciate it.”

“Little Miss Lucy as well. She’s the perfect example of the principle, ‘Eat a lot and grow big!’”

“Really? Lucy?”

“Yes. She ate enough for a fully grown man,” Catalina told me.

“Did she? You’d never guess from how tiny she is,” I said, feigning calm.

It makes sense that Krul had eaten a lot...but Lucy too?

I glanced over to where Diana and Lidy were keeping the young wolf entertained. I approached Lidy softly and asked her in a low

voice, "Apparently, Lucy ate a mountain of food while we were gone. She's never eaten so much at home, right?"

Lidy nodded and stared into space as she contemplated what I had told her. Then, her eyes suddenly widened and her gaze snapped to Lucy.

Startled by Lidy's burst of energy, Diana asked, "Wh-What?"

However, Lidy kept her attention on Lucy, picking the little wolf up and staring into her eyes. Lucy seemed to think she was just getting a hug from her big sister, and her tail swished from side to side in the air.

Lidy didn't take her eyes off Lucy's. After a while, in a tone that Diana and I could just barely hear, she whispered, "Lucy's been corrupted by magic."

"I knew it," I replied with a sigh, and she nodded.

Even if Lucy was going through a growth spurt, her appetite wouldn't increase so quickly out of the blue. But if Lucy was like Krul and needed to intake magic energy for sustenance, then it was highly possible she would have to eat more than normal to compensate for the lack of magic in the capital.

"That can't be..." Diana murmured. The news seemed to have dealt a huge blow to her.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "She might have been 'corrupted,' but that doesn't mean she'll turn violent, right?"

Lidy nodded again. "Monsters born entirely from stagnant magical energy are one thing, but normal animals will usually keep their original disposition even after they are transformed by magic," she explained. "The black bear Eizo fought was malicious, but the magic had only enhanced the darkness that was already there."

"So, then...!" Diana's eyes shined hopefully.

"Forest wolves are smart and keep to themselves. My guess is that Lucy won't change very drastically. She may become more intelligent, but there shouldn't be much of an issue, I imagine."

This time, it was Diana's turn to be relieved. She looked like she was going to keel over at any second, so I slipped an arm around her shoulders to support her.

"Anyway, let's go home for now," I suggested. "We can discuss it more on the way back."

Diana nodded listlessly.

We prepared to leave. Lucy had taken a liking to Catalina and ran up to her, begging for scratches. Catalina lifted Lucy into her arms and fixed me with her stare.

Corrupted or not, we're not going to give up our little girl, got it?

We took back the luggage we'd entrusted to the servants and loaded everything into the cart. After hitching up Krul and getting

Lucy settled in the back, we all clambered in ourselves. We hadn't brought a lot with us to begin with, so packing up didn't take us long.

Before departing, I turned to the servants. "Bowman, Catalina, we greatly appreciate the hospitality you have shown us. Please give our regards to the count as well."

"Master regrets not being able to meet with you. Please come and visit again."

"We'll call upon you again in the future," I promised with a smile and a wave.

I was amused, in part, by my own contradictory self. Even though I called Marius by his given name and dropped all formalities when speaking to him, I always made sure to address the servants with proper courtesy.

Diana did her best to smile too and waved farewell. The others in the family also waved, except for Rike, who was at the reins. Though parting was bittersweet, we left the Eimoor residence behind us.

We exited the inner gates back out to the crowded streets of the outer city (Lucy radiated lovability, her cuteness a soothing balm for all the people we passed). Eventually, we proceeded through the outer gates and left the capital for good.

Once we were settled on the road, I turned to everyone. "About Lucy..."

The pup in question came over to me and curled up on my knee. Had she thought I was calling for her, or had she simply gotten tired of the scenery?

I petted her as I continued, "Our little girl has been corrupted by magic."

Everyone besides Lidy and Diana swallowed thickly.

"That being said, as of right now, there's nothing to worry about," I said. "She might just end up a little smarter than other wolves."

The other's expressions relaxed into ones of relief.

"Then...what do we do?" Helen asked hesitantly.

"We'll continue to look after her, of course," I replied.

"Will that be okay?" This time, Diana was the one who posed the question.

I made an effort to keep my expression neutral as I answered. "We made the decision to rescue her, so we can't toss her aside simply because she's become a magical beast. If she becomes dangerous, we'll have to take responsibility...and only then can we truly claim to have taken accountability for our decision. At least, that's what I think."

Obviously, I didn't want to have to take Lucy's life. We'd adopted her of our own volition. To dispose of her when raising her stopped being convenient for us felt too much like playing god.

However, should the need arise, I'll make sure my hands are the only

ones dirtied.

Samya might have pieced together my resolution, because she was looking at me with worry in her eyes.

“We’ll raise her properly so the worst never comes to pass,” I declared, striving to keep my tone light. “Anyway, at least now we know why Lucy and her mother were driven out of their pack.”

“The others... They sensed she was corrupted,” Samya muttered. It must have been a rare case if she hadn’t considered it before.

“Yeah. The mother might’ve been corrupted as well, or she might’ve just been unable to abandon Lucy and decided to leave the pack.”

Had Lucy simply been the runt of the litter, her mother might have just tossed her aside, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Maybe Lucy had been the only pup and her mother had resolved to protect her to the end, no matter how she turned out.

Forest wolves were intelligent, and intelligence went hand in hand with kindness. That’s what I believed. And since Lucy was one of such a noble species, surely she’d be...

I pushed the useless—and arrogant—hopes from my thoughts, and shook my head to clear it.

“Anyway, Lucy is still our little girl. That fact hasn’t changed.”

“That’s all I need to know,” Helen declared in a bright voice, perhaps to deliberately lighten the mood. Sounds of agreement came from everyone in the cart.

We’d hit a few bumps along the way, but our first road trip as a family had come to a happy conclusion.

Chapter 7: Conquering the Forest

One evening after we'd returned from a trip to Camilo's, I made an offhand comment over dinner. "You know, we've never been to the other side of the lake."

Little did I know the great adventure my simple remark would bring.

The lake that Krul, Lucy, and I visited every morning for water boasted a considerable surface area. I'd never even seen the opposite shore. From that fact, I was able to conclude a couple of things:

One—the shore was at least five kilometers out.

And two—this world was generally spherical.

In response to my comment, Samya, who was chewing on a slice of roast meat, said, "Really? Never?"

I nodded. "We've explored a decent bit of the forest, but I don't think we've ever been to the north or west, and we've only seen a bit of the south."

Forge Eizo was located in the eastern region of the Black Forest. We'd made a few forays into the south while foraging for medicinal herbs, but that'd been the extent of it. The capital was to the south, and the road leading to it skirted the forest's southern border. I was sure we'd traveled a considerable distance south before, but it was unlikely that we would ever enter the forest from that direction.

Samya had originally roamed the western and northern regions. When she'd come to the eastern area of the forest, she'd been attacked by a black bear. Maybe her memories from that time were a little jumbled up—that could explain why she'd assumed we'd been to the other regions.

"Let's go then, up to the north," Samya declared.

"Is there anything there?" I asked.

"Not rea— Oh!" Suddenly, she gasped and her eyes widened slightly. She must've remembered something.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Back when I was changing dens from the west to the north, I saw some kinda sparkling stone," she said.

"An ore of some sort?"

"No clue."

Appoitakara was too much to hope for...but I would be more than happy with any kind of rare ore. If she'd stumbled upon orichalcum,

I'd be over the moon.

"Could it have been a gem?" Diana suggested. "That would fetch a good price on the market."

That was a possibility, since Samya said it'd glittered. Jewelstones were inherently valuable too.

But Samya pursed her lips. "The thing is, once this type of stone is dug up, it becomes dull like dirt. Nobody—and I mean *nobody*—can get their hands on it."

I glanced over at Lidy who was sipping on tea; she gave a tiny nod, confirming my unsaid assumption. "It might be related to magic," she explained. "The stone could be imbued with magical essence, which causes it to become dirt-like when removed from the ground. It's not impossible, especially if the stone has a volatile disposition where its magic easily dissipates."

"If you were to weave more magic into the stone, Boss..." Rike hinted while draining her cup of brandy.

Helen picked up on Rike's train of thought. "We might just be able to collect some for ourselves." She finished off her wine.

Lidy nodded again.

Hmmm. Given its unique properties, it might just come in handy in my smithing work after all.

"The rainy season is still a little ways off, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Samya replied around a mouthful of meat. "We've got a little leeway before the rains come. A few days maybe."

"Good. Then let's take the next two or three days to explore the unknown areas of the forest," I decided. "In the meantime, we can also search for the...stone?"

Voices of assent came from all around the table.

There was plenty of time before our next delivery. Even with a longer break, we would be able to meet our quota by working the last three to four days. I was excited to see how far we could explore, and this would also be a good opportunity to seek out potential shelters that we could run to if disaster struck.

I was looking forward to the outing. Though it was only going to be a short excursion, nevertheless, I figured it would make Krul and Lucy happy too. It didn't matter whether we found minerals or gemstones; it was enough to be able to take Krul and Lucy out with us.

The night deepened, and the family chatted excitedly about what we were going to need for a two-day journey.

The next morning, we packed our bags and gave them to Krul, who would help us carry them. Following Helen's advice, we brought enough food to last us a week outdoors. Samya promised there would be places along the way to fill up on water, so we decided to take only

a few smaller pouches.

Every member of the family armed themselves as well. As a party, I was sure we had the skills to fight off anything dangerous, but not without weapons, not even for Helen... Well, *probably* not even for Helen. She did seem skilled enough to defeat most opponents barehanded.

Regardless of what Helen could and could not do, it was unmistakable that defeating any average threat would be a breeze for us with the proper weapons. Taking a dragon head-on might be beyond our capabilities, but what would a dragon be doing in a dense forest like this anyway?

“Best I bring this with me too, eh?” I said, picking up *Diaphanous Ice*.

Ideally, its turn in the spotlight would never come. That said, out of the weapons in our arsenal, it had the highest attack stats. I strapped the katana around my waist, feeling its weight against my hip. Though I brought it out with me once in a while, I still hadn’t gotten enough time to grow used to it.

“Now, I’m ready,” I declared.

Samya looked me up and down. “You look like a stereotypical northerner with that sword on you.”

“You think? But my clothing’s a completely different style,” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Besides, Nilda has the same type of sword, and she’s a demon.”

Samya’s expression twisted with consternation. “Erm, I can’t explain it. It’s just a feeling.”

The others had finished their own preparations and were now listening in. They nodded in agreement.

Feeling somewhat self-conscious, I changed the subject. “Come on, let’s get going!” I called out.

My family (including Krul and Lucy) responded with shouts of agreement, their voices laced with amusement, and we all set off into the forest.

Surveying the party, I remarked, “I feel like we’re real explorers.”

We had geared up and packed our provisions, then headed into a forest where no people dared to roam (setting aside the beastfolk who lived here) on a quest for the proverbial ore. In fact, we were the very definition of explorers.

Explorers—in the games of my previous world, such people had often been called adventurers. Their role in this world was primarily to survey ruins and relics. The six of us were now explorers of the forest.

“It’s a tough job,” Helen remarked, her eyes trained on our

surroundings.

Our defense primarily relied on Samya's sensitive nose and Helen's Presence Detection skill—or simply put, her instincts. Between the two of them, we seldom ran into any problems.

I kept watch in the direction opposite Helen. "Sure. Explorers never know when they'll have their next meal or whether they'll have a roof over their head for the night."

Proper associations like Adventurer's Guilds didn't exist here, although there did seem to be loosely organized unions. The concept of guilds had its roots in unions too. The day could yet come when we'd see the rise of a formal Explorer's Guild in this world.

"True. We mercenaries are no different," Helen said. "We can never be sure what tomorrow will bring." She sighed. Her eyes gazed somewhere far off in the distance as if she were lost in a memory.

"Well, now you have a home to return to and hot meals every day waiting on the dinner table," I reassured her. "And I promise we'll turn straight around if we run into danger."

She smiled. "You're right."

I grinned back at her, pretending that I hadn't noticed the trace of loneliness written on her features.

After a short break, we resumed our journey. Around the time the sun hit its peak, I started thinking about finding a place for us to eat lunch. That was when I realized that our surroundings now looked vaguely different than the forest I was used to.

Samya, who was leading our pack, noticed my bewilderment. "From here on out, this is new territory for all of you, I think."

"The trees here are different," Lidy commented, peering this way and that.

I took a closer look and saw that she was right. The species that were the most plentiful in this area was one that I'd rarely seen around the cabin. The wood, however, didn't seem to be significantly softer or harder than the popular variety where we lived; it wouldn't matter which type we cut down for wood. Perhaps the variation in flora could be chalked up to certain nutrients in the soil.

Lidy knelt and ran a hand over the underbrush. "There are various species of grasses too, but these are the same as the ones around our home. There's nothing in particular here we could use."

Diana crouched next to her and rubbed the blades of grass softly between her fingers.

"In other words, there's no reason for us to come out here to harvest herbs," I concluded.

Lidy nodded. "That's correct."

We'd been charting a straight line through the forest for nearly

half a day. Usually, we stopped along the way to forage for fruits or medicinal herbs and would need to return home before nightfall. We had never come this far before.

If we found anything useful up ahead to harvest, then it would be possible to make the trip more frequently, but otherwise I didn't expect to go out there very often.

The cabin was where it was for a reason. Off the top of my head, it was reasonably close to a water source, and there was an abundance of fruits and herbs in the greater surrounding area (though collecting them required us to walk a considerable distance away from the house).

However, a bountiful supply of food came along with animals and wild beasts, and we needed the necessary know-how to deal with them. All of this was according to the Watchdog's will, and I had no choice but to accept it as such.

A little ways from where the scenery initially changed, there was a clearing—a small stream ran through it. The surrounding banks were formed more from small pebbles than soil and they were free of trees, which might have been due to the water rising occasionally.

I gave the area a quick survey, then suggested, "Let's eat here."

This wasn't the ideal place to camp—in fact, it was best avoided as a campsite—but it would serve as a temporary resting spot to take a meal. At the first sign of danger, be it the stream swelling or the waters turning muddy, we could immediately evacuate.

"You got it!" Helen said, after checking out the surroundings herself. "Krul!" she called.

The drake trilled, "*Kululululu*," and trotted over.

"Good girl. We're gonna need our bags." She stroked Krul's neck.

Krul nuzzled Helen's head back. "*Kululuu*." Krul bowed her neck for us.

"You're so smart," Diana complimented, her eyes soft. She patted Krul's lowered head.

The others and I took our bags from Krul and started to lay out lunch.

"*Itadakimasu*," I said.

"*Itadakimasu!!!*" the others cheered in unison.

After giving our thanks for the meal (as per the "northern" customs), we dug in. Today's lunch was a burger-inspired dish. I'd minced up venison to make patties, grilled them, and sandwiched them between slices of flatbread along with some vegetables from our garden.

Time slowed as we relaxed on the riverbank. Lucy scarfed down her (unseasoned) portion of meat and then ran around the banks with

Krul.

The sky was an unbroken blue expanse. Currently, the weather was so beautiful that it was difficult to believe that the rainy season, during which the rain would continue unbroken, was almost upon us (at least, according to Samya). It was tempting to spend the rest of the day lazing about and then simply head straight home at night.

"It's so gorgeous out. I want to take a nap," Lidy said from where she was sitting beside me.

I nodded, washing down a bite of my burger with tea that she'd brewed. "You'd never think that we're here to explore the area."

Lidy chuckled. "That's right."

Wait a minute!

"Darn, we should've mapped out our route," I exclaimed.

Mapping was a critical part of exploration—I was familiar with the concept from the video games I'd played in my previous world.

In the past, I'd asked Samya whether there were maps of the Black Forest, and she'd told me that there weren't any accurate sketches, or really, any maps at all. The reason was simple: it didn't matter whether they existed or not.

People (including races other than humans) who needed to rely on a map had no business wandering around the forest, and people who could roam or live in the forest without worry didn't need maps to begin with.

During that conversation, Helen had grumbled, "Camilo didn't give me a map when I first came here either, that stingy old bastard. He only told me what to look for."

Maybe Camilo had assumed that figuring out the route was part of the requirement for visiting our forge. Or maybe he was thinking ahead and trying to prevent a map to our cabin being leaked.

So what if it leaked? Hundreds of people could get their hands on the map, but no more than a handful would actually be able to find us.

Aaand I'd come full circle—there were no maps because their existence was inconsequential.

That said, it would still be convenient for us to have one. As a family, we were far from being naive, ignorant travelers, but we weren't masters of the forest either. Thus, a simple map—one that was roughly to scale and had markers for the paths and vegetation—would make our lives easier the next time we came to mine the mystery stone. Of course, this assumed that we found it in the first place.

But in response to my fussing, Samya frowned. "I remember it all anyways, so whadda we need a map for? We've come all this way based on my memories in the first place."

"That's true," I admitted.

Samya had been leading us the entire time. If I really wanted a

map no matter what, I could consult Samya and draw one up later. It made sense that she didn't see any reason to make a map right at this moment.

All of a sudden, Samya's expression grew pinched. I glanced at Helen, whose face was also grim; she was looking in the same direction as Samya.

The curtain of silence fell hard and heavy, and a tense atmosphere enveloped the family. Krul and Lucy were holding themselves perfectly still, not making a sound. To them, it might have felt like some sort of game.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

Samya brought her index finger to her lips. "*Shhh*. I think there's someone ahead of us."

I had been feeling relaxed and loose, but upon hearing Samya's warning, I immediately snapped to focus.

The sound of rustling grass hit our ears. Samya's nose twitched furiously, and Lucy's too. Unfortunately, we were upwind. Scents were flowing toward the direction the sound had come from, but our noses were left in the dark.

The rustling stopped for a brief time but then restarted twice as loud. The unseen stranger crashed through the thickets, making a beeline for us. They knew we were here, and they were coming.

I instinctively drew *Diaphanous Ice* from its sheath on my waist—the appoitakara rang quietly. Samya's ears perked up, one in response to the swish of the moving grasses and one in response to me. Helen unsheathed her new swords too. She hadn't used them since she'd slain the bear the time we'd rescued Lucy. Someday, she might get another chance to cut more bears.

The stranger moved toward us without hesitation, or at least that was what it sounded like to me. Since my combat skills had been given to me and not honed, who knew how far I could trust them.

Samya brought up a hand, signaling that there was no need for us to make a move. Apparently, she could sense that our visitor had no intention of attacking us.

Taking her word for it, I put *Diaphanous Ice* away. Helen resheathed her swords as well. The metal sliced through the air, and the blades left a trail of bright blue light in their wake.

Once Samya saw us relax, she gave a short whistle. We heard an answering whistle from ahead of us, in the direction the rustling had been coming from.

So, our visitor must be...

"Jolanda!" Samya exclaimed.

The sound of the grasses being pushed aside grew louder and nearer. Our visitor must've picked up speed. With one last crash, the

figure—a wolf-type beastfolk who lived in the Black Forest—burst through the thicket.

Samya had been right.

Pointed ears peeked out of Jolanda's gray hair. Her expression was as thoughtful and solemn as usual, and she was wearing the same clothing as when we'd met her a little while ago. However, last time, she'd also been carrying heavy baggage—the fact that she was traveling light must've meant she wasn't running from a bear this time.

"I was right. Thought it was you," Jolanda said. Her expression was still melancholic, but that was just her personality. From the way her ears and tail were moving, she seemed to be happy to see us.

Lucy padded up to Jolanda, her tail wagging. "Arf!" she barked.

"Oh?" Noticing Lucy, Jolanda crouched down without any signs of shying away or running. Apparently, her fear of strangers only applied to people. Lucy's wagging tail picked up speed, and Jolanda scratched the pup's head. "Who's this?" she asked with a glance over at us.

"Her parents are..." I trailed off with a shake of my head. "That is why we took her in."

"I see..." Jolanda gently scratched under Lucy's chin. The pup's eyes slipped half-shut in pleasure, and her tail never stopped moving.

Jolanda and Lucy looked like mother and daughter. That could probably be chalked up to the fact that Jolanda was a wolf beastfolk.

"I can't take you in, but you've found a good home, haven't you?" she said with a wistful smile.

Jolanda lived alone and didn't hunt enough to have food to spare. She would've had to hunt more in order to support Lucy—something she could probably afford to do—but it was still a bit of a gamble.

She stood back up and faced me again. "So?"

"Uh...?" Not understanding, I cocked my head.

"Aaah...erm..." Jolanda scratched her head, possibly having noticed that she hadn't used nearly enough words to get her message across. "Why are you all here? This is pretty far from your house, isn't it?" She tilted her head quizzically.

Samya answered, "Do you remember the pretty stone...or soil we found before?"

"Oh, the rainbow stone, you mean?"

"Yeah, that."

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen it recently—"

Samya's shoulders dropped. "Oh...really?"

"—at least, not in the east," Jolanda finished.

"Huh? Does that mean...?" Samya pressed in closer to Jolanda.

Jolanda nodded. "Yeah. I found some just recently in the west. I can't be sure it's still there, but no one's going to take it, so I'm

guessing it still is.”

Samya looked over at the rest of us, her eyes sparkling.

Hold your horses! There're no guarantees.

But everyone else's eyes were twinkling too.

Jolanda smacked her fist into her palm. “I get it. You're here to look for the stone.”

“Yup!” Samya exclaimed with her chest puffed out.

As long as we knew where the stone was, we would be able to find it much faster. Of course, we could still fail our mission, but obviously we'd all be happiest if we succeeded.

“Knowing the general area will be a great help. Now we don't have to keep fumbling around in the dark,” I remarked.

Everyone nodded, but Jolanda's face twisted into a complicated expression.

“What's wrong?” Samya asked.

“Eizo said ‘general’ location,” Jolanda replied.

“Me?” I asked.

She nodded and then demanded, “Why aren't you asking me to show you the way?”

“Huh?”

She fixed me with her stare. “That would be the quickest solution, no?”

I hesitated. “That's true, but...”

Jolanda clearly wanted us to bring her along. “How long will it take?” I asked.

“About a day...or a little less,” she answered.

“We have plenty of food too, right?”

“That we do,” Helen replied.

Jolanda jumped in shock.

That's right. Helen wasn't living with us the last time we met Jolanda.

“She's one of the family,” I explained to Jolanda. “Don't worry.”

“R-R-Right...” She nodded hesitantly.

Jolanda was terribly shy. The fact that she hadn't hidden like when we'd first met could be a sign that she had gotten used to us.

Helen thrust out her hand. “Nice to meetcha! The name's Helen!”

Samya watched over the interaction, holding her breath. When Jolanda gripped the proffered hand lightly, she sighed with relief.

Setting aside Jolanda's discomfort around new people, there were practical logistics to consider. We'd brought along enough food to last our entire family about a week—even with one additional person, we should be able to last five or six days, easy. Even if we were delayed by unforeseeable circumstances, the chances were still low that we'd run out of food. If worst came to worst, we could find something to eat along the way.

“Well, Jolanda, as long as it isn’t any bother for you, will you be our guide?” I asked.

She nodded. “No problem.”

Behind her, Samya slapped her hands together in excitement.

“Lead the way!”

Jolanda looked at Samya with a slight frown, but Samya grinned back at her, perfectly carefree. Taken aback, Jolanda’s expression turned uneasy as she finally replied, “Okay, sure.”

“*Ruff!*” added Lucy spiritedly.

The sound of our laughter echoed through the woods. Our party of explorers, having grown larger by one, walked deeper into the Black Forest.

As I had suspected, the lake was massive. Near our house, it extended to the horizon, and the opposite shore was entirely out of sight. According to Jolanda, our corner of the lake was a protrusion from the main body, so it was actually the easiest part of the lake to get to from the forest entrance.

Of course, from the perspective of the townspeople, our cabin was still considered to be deep in the forest. It may have been “easier” to get to, but the actual difference in difficulty was negligible for most people.

After hearing Jolanda’s explanation, Samya asked, “Really? You sure?” Judging from her question, she didn’t have a grasp of the detailed topography of the region.

The three of us were walking with Lidy in a group ahead of the others.

Lidy turned to Jolanda. “Is this where you normally...?”

“Yes.” Jolanda nodded, her voice soft. After Samya, Jolanda was most comfortable with Lidy, possibly because Lidy was a fellow forest-dweller.

We were still in the northeast region of the forest, a place where Jolanda frequently made her dens. Samya’s former territory was the northwest, and she had rarely wandered out here.

“You really were in the wrong place at the wrong time then when I found you, huh?” I said to Samya.

She pursed her lips. “That’s what I said.”

“And I believed you,” I assured her. “It just feels more real to me now.” I smiled dryly, reached out a hand, and stroked Samya’s hair. She looked embarrassed for a split second and then strode off ahead.

Jolanda followed after her, taunting, “Are you blushing?”

“Wha—? Why would I be?” Samya protested.

I heard their exchange loud and clear from behind, but I tuned it out.

“This area looks good, doesn’t it?” Samya declared, a hand propped on her waist.

The ground was clear of shrubs, and we had a relatively unobstructed view of our surroundings.

Jolanda returned from scouting the area and announced, “There’s a creek not too far away, just as I remembered.” She’d been positive there was a water source around here and had gone to verify.

I lightly sucked in a breath, then whooped, “Here, we make camp!” That was a parody of a famous line from my old world—I’d heard it on a variety show from Hokkaido. In my previous life, I had dreamed of saying it one day.

Of course, no one here understood the reference, so they just agreed to my suggestion normally. We proceeded to erect the encampment.

Well, maybe “encampment” was too formal a term for what we’d made. After all, it wasn’t as if we were in the army or anything. Our party mostly consisted of women—I was the only man and that included Lucy. We also didn’t have any tents. For sleeping arrangements, we were planning to pack in along the ground like sardines in a can. We also set up a watch detail, but it was just a two-person rotation of me and Helen.

However, we did have a proper campfire, over which we hung a pot (filled with a random assortment of ingredients). Once we were all sitting around the fire, it felt like we were camping for real, even if most people would think we were crazy for sleeping in the middle of an infamous danger zone.

The snaps of burning branches echoed. We had tried to gather dry wood, but of course, the branches we’d found weren’t made specifically for campfires. We just had to make do with what we found.

Staring into the flickering flames, I said, “There’s nothing stopping us from camping near the house, but somehow, this feels different.”

Krul and Lucy had been prancing about in excitement up until a minute ago, but having worn themselves out, they’d curled up together to sleep. Krul was lying down on the ground with Lucy on top of her.

Diana petted Krul’s head softly and nodded. “Yeah. It must be because we’ve traveled somewhere completely new.”

“That’s the biggest reason,” I agreed.

We were still within the bounds of the Black Forest, but it wasn’t quite the same—the area around our forge had become part of our everyday scenery, a fact that I was happy about. Or perhaps the correct word for it was proud.

I fed the fire.

Samya sipped on her soup and asked Jolanda, "How's it taste?"

"Mmm, good," Jolanda replied with a small nod.

To me, they looked like sisters.

In the warm and familiar atmosphere, Diana turned to Jolanda.

"Why not come live with us?" she suggested lightly. "You'll have Samya there with you."

However, Jolanda made an apologetic face. "It sounds fun, but I don't really like living with other people."

I guess she's a lone wolf through and through.

And so, the curtains closed on the scene—the seven of us sat around the fire, passing the evening in the forest with lively conversation.

I woke up to the feeling of my body being rocked. The fire was still alive, having been fed continuously, but was considerably smaller.

The person who'd made sure the fire never went out was the same person who had woken me: Helen.

"Time to rotate?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Yup," she replied, then chuckled quietly.

"What is it?"

"Just getting a sense of déjà vu," she answered.

"Ohhh..."

She must've been remembering the time she'd been kidnapped and brought into the empire. During our escape, after Camilo and I had successfully rescued her, we'd forgone proper lodgings in favor of speed and had just camped out.

We hadn't put Helen in the watch rotation back then, but she'd sat next to me by the fire during my turn, and we'd talked. It hadn't been that long ago, but the events were already fading into distant memory.

"I'm glad you can remember what happened and still laugh," I remarked. "Sounds like you're all right."

She smiled bitterly. "You thought it was still weighing on me?"

"Well, yes..." I admitted, throwing some more wood onto the fire.

"You might be leagues stronger than me, and a mercenary at that, but you're still a lady."

I didn't know exactly how old Helen was, and I wasn't about to ask. She was surely past her teens, but she didn't seem to be in her thirties yet. My guess was that she was in her twenties, but regardless, a lady was a lady, no matter the age.

"'Lady' my ass..." she said, her voice full of exasperation. "You're so..."

I shrugged lightly. "I'm always here if you want to talk, okay?"

Helen made a complicated face. "Fine..."

She settled down on the ground. After a little while, her breathing deepened, and I knew she was asleep.

Chapter 8: She Who Entered the Forest

In the morning, we roasted jerky over the dwindling fire for breakfast and then quickly washed up. Our favorite noble lady didn't have any complaints about her night spent outdoors. In fact, she was pleased. "You know, this is my first time camping," Diana remarked. "I've always wondered what it's like, and now I know!"

Of course, the ones most thrilled by the night outdoors were the two wee lasses of the family. Krul and Lucy usually slept apart from the rest of us in the drake barn—Krul's little hut—but today we were all right by their sides when they woke up. Was it any wonder they were so excited? We had to calm the two of them down (Diana fussed like a mother hen) while we prepared to depart.

It was day two of Forge Eizo's adventure in the forest. Through the foliage, we could see patches of the sky, so cloudless and blue that it felt as if our journey had the blessings of the heavens.

Jolanda led us, but strictly speaking, the one actually strutting in the front, her chest thrust out and exuding an air of command, was Lucy. To the side of Lucy walked Jolanda, and to her rear was Samya, ready to sweep Lucy out of the way at the first sign of trouble.

According to our plan, we would reach the "rainbow stone" by evening at the latest, or so Jolanda had said. Overall, that would mean the stone was two days away from the cabin, one-way—it was a reasonable enough distance that we could afford to make the journey periodically should the stone turn out to be valuable.

Round-trip, it would take four days, which was the perfect bite-size travel itinerary. You could say that our destination was still within our own backyard, but nevertheless, it was a pleasant distance away from home. If the mood struck, we could even extend the trip by a day to make it a round five days.

And so, we proceeded toward our destination, the sun creeping slowly higher into the sky. Our journey was peaceful and quiet all morning until the sun reached its zenith.

While we traveled, we stayed vigilant. However, here in the interior region of the Black Forest, only beastfolk and wild animals roamed. Since there were next to no other humans, there was less of a need for caution.

As for myself, I was relaxed. I savored the forest air, feeling as if I

were just taking a stroll with an extra pinch of alertness thrown in.

That was when we heard it.

“Eeeyaaah!”

A woman’s shrill scream pierced the air.

For a second, I thought the sound might have been the cry of a bird native to the Black Forest, one that didn’t nest around our clearing, but Samya and Jolanda’s tense expressions made me revise my hypothesis.

Samya clicked her tongue and snarled, “An outsider here? In the heart of the forest?”

“Impossible... It’s practically unheard of.” Jolanda glanced over at Samya.

We were very deep into the Black Forest. A warrior of Helen’s caliber (i.e. high) was one thing, but chances were that your average person, for instance a hapless village girl, would be attacked by wolves right after setting foot in the forest. A skilled fighter could travel through the forest with the right preparation. Or an unbelievable amount of luck. It wasn’t *entirely* impossible for someone to end up in the interior of the forest without meeting a single wild beast along the way. Whatever the circumstances were, we had to scope out the situation, find the person who’d screamed and see what happened to them.

We kept our eyes open and ears perked as we rushed as fast as we could in the direction the scream had come from.

“I heard it over here,” Samya said, her round ears twitching.

Jolanda’s slightly pointed ears were swiveling as well.

Lucy, watching the two beastfolk, tried to imitate them by moving her ears too. I doubted she understood what was happening, but she was undeniably adorable. Luckily, Diana was holding Lucy in her arms, and my shoulder was safe for the moment.

“With how sharp your hearing is, I’m sure you’re right,” Helen said to Samya and Jolanda. She, too, was searching for signs of the other person. “That is, if our quarry didn’t run when they heard us coming.”

I nodded, agreeing with her, as I scanned the area myself. The luxuriant forest expanded out around us. It looked nearly identical to the woods surrounding our cabin, and the thought sent a chill down my spine. Why? Because it’s difficult to escape a maze when everything looks the same. If I found myself dumped out here (without my cheats), it would be nearly impossible to find my way home. In reality, I wasn’t traveling blind, and I did have a general idea of what direction the cabin was in.

We scoured the surroundings, and I hoped what we’d heard hadn’t been a dying scream.

"It's hard to see with these blasted trees in the way..." I groused.

"I'm with you..." Diana responded.

The two of us were different from Samya and Jolanda (and Krul and Lucy)—they all had superior senses of smell and hearing. Even Helen and Lidy had their honed instincts for picking up other presences. Diana and I had only our sight to rely on. Needless to say, we weren't much help in a low-visibility place like this, to say nothing of Rike, who had only the bare minimum of combat ability.

After we went a little farther, Samya paused in her tracks. The rest of us followed her lead. The air was thick with tension.

"Someone's here," Samya mumbled.

Helen nodded. "Yeah."

Jolanda nodded too without saying a word.

The three of them suddenly split up and ran toward a nearby thicket.

No, "run" wasn't the right description. Samya bounded forward. Helen, with her agility, looked like she was flying. Jolanda moved as if she were sliding across the grass.

They reached their target at nearly the same time, and we heard a second scream. "Aaaagh!"

As far as my ears could tell, the voice was the same as before.

Now, who do we have here?

Helen stood up, yanking the mystery person—a young woman—up by her collar with both hands.

"Haaaaah..." Helen sighed heavily, her face screwed up as if she'd taken a bite of something nasty. "What the hell are you doing here, Flore?" Helen scolded her captive like a mother scolding her daughter.

The woman named Flore had green eyes and medium-length, flaxen hair drawn up in a ponytail. She was wearing the kind of village clothing I'd often seen women wearing in the capital, but what set her immediately apart from the average village girl was the leather breastplate, the shield strapped around her arm, and the small sword hanging on her waist.

The rest of us who'd been on the sidelines ran over to join Samya, Jolanda, and Helen.

When we got there, I asked, "An acquaintance?"

Helen looked at me and nodded. "She's a—how do I put this—a mercenary friend of mine. Well, that's how we met at least." She turned back toward Flore. "What am I gonna do with you?" she chided. "Where exactly do you think you are?"

"That's my line, Sis!" Flore yelled back, refusing to back down even an inch. "Why in the world are you holed up in the Black Forest?"

"What did you come here for?" Helen asked.

“You told me about your trip here, remember? It piqued my interest. I figured that, with my skills, I should have no problem taking it on myself,” Flore explained, sticking her tongue out impishly.

Helen covered her face with one hand, a move that was probably all but unconscious. “I can’t believe you...”

“But come on! The boars are killer opponents!” Flore said cheerfully.

Helen’s gaze sharpened. “You faced one?”

“Eh? No? I bumped into one when I was coming out of the bushes and screamed out of surprise. I smacked it with my shield, and it ran off somewhere. But that was the first time I haven’t been able to knock something unconscious.”

Helen nodded. “I see.”

That was the mystery of the first scream solved.

Flore’s roaming gaze suddenly stopped on something. “Oooh! A doggie! Cuuute!” She was looking at Lucy, bundled up in Diana’s arms.

“Arf!” Lucy replied, her tail wagging.

That’s our polite little girl.

With Diana’s permission, Flore scratched Lucy’s head, and Lucy’s tail picked up speed. Flore watched the pup with a goofy smile (Diana, for her part, was unabashedly proud), but then, her expression turned quizzical in realization. “Huh? This tyke is...”

I scratched my head. “Right... She’s a forest wolf cub,” I admitted. I left out the part about her being a magical beast.

Lucy had several traits characteristic of forest wolves. I didn’t know if Flore had encountered the beasts frequently in the past, but she’d at least seen enough of them to have recognized Lucy as a wolf cub. A clumsy attempt to hide the truth would’ve just made her pry into the matter further. Instead, I explained the situation to Flore the same way I’d told Jolanda.

“She got separated from her pack,” I said. “She’s an orphan too, so we decided to raise her ourselves.”

“Woow.” Flore petted Lucy on the head again. “You’ve had a tough life, haven’t you?” She turned back to me. “Say, this little one—Eh?” Before she finished her question, her eyes went wide.

I looked around to see Samya and Jolanda accompanied by Krul. “The area’s cl...clear,” Jolanda reported in a quiet voice, shuffling behind Samya.

Samya sighed. It seemed that they’d gone to scout our surroundings for us.

“Thank you,” I replied to Jolanda. “Why don’t we all take a short break?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

But suddenly, a loud shout pierced the calm of the Black Forest. “It’s a-a dragon?!” Those words surely echoed throughout the entirety of the forest. Naturally, Flore was the perpetrator.

The rest of us were rooted in place by surprise, but Flore, her eyes sparkling, darted forward and began to circle Krul at a shockingly fast speed. “Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod!” she squealed. “It’s a drake!!! Amazing!”

Krul lowered her head, curious as to what was happening.

Hit once again by Krul’s charm, Flore said, “Awww! Aren’t you a cutie pie? I thought you’d be scarier.” She reached out slowly and stroked Krul’s head.

Krul responded by licking a stripe up Flore’s face.

“Eek! It tickles,” Flore protested, giggling.

The rest of us smiled at their antics, and Diana watched over their interaction with pride.

“Now that we’re all caught up, once again, this is Flore.” Helen laid a hand on Flore’s shoulder. “We were mercenaries together, but she joined waaay after me, so there’s no need to bow and scrape to her.”

Flore took over and declared, with her head held high, “That’s right. I’ll only feel awkward. Think of me as your pal.”

Then, she straightened up and swept into a formal bow. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Flore. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

But she couldn’t keep up that facade for long. She immediately broke into an easy grin. “Sike!”

Helen poked Flore lightly in retaliation. The forest rang with our laughter.

“I’m the owner of the forge. The name’s Eizo.” After introducing myself, I bowed in the northern manner.

Helen introduced the other members in our party. “This is Samya; she’s one of the beast folk. The dwarf is Rike. This is Diana; she’s human. Lidy’s an elf. Then you have the drake, Krul, and the wolf, Lucy. They’re the family who’ve been taking care of me.”

The four women bowed. The two animals didn’t seem to understand what was going on, but they greeted her back in their own way.

“Nice to meetcha,” Flore said. She tilted her head and pointed. “Hold on a sec, who’s the one hiding over there?”

At the other end of her finger was Jolanda, peeking out at us from behind a tree trunk.

“That’s my friend, Jolanda. She’s a beastfolk like me,” Samya answered with a massive sigh. “She’ll come out sooner or later, so just

ignore her.”

Flore looked shocked but quickly recovered with a smile. “Okey dokey!”

“So?” Helen prompted Flore.

“So what?” Flore asked back.

She scowled at her junior. “You couldn’t possibly have come to the Black Forest just because it seemed interesting, right?”

Beneath the glare of the ultimate mercenary, even a grown man would quake, but Flore was perfectly unfazed, and her expression remained totally carefree. “Huh? Nah, I genuinely just thought it looked fun...?”

Maybe she’s used to Helen’s glare? I suddenly experienced a flash of sympathy for the hardships Helen must’ve had to go through.

Helen covered her face with one hand. “What am I gonna do with you...?”

Flore grinned angelically back.

Heaving a great sigh, Helen turned toward me. “Hey, Eizo...”

“‘See ya later,’ isn’t a dialogue option, right?” I asked, aware that my eyebrows had furrowed.

Flore had a close call earlier, but she’d still escaped and made it all the way here. I thought she could probably find her way back out safely one way or another. However, we weren’t strangers anymore, and obviously, the best choice was the safest choice. In this case, that choice was...

“If you’re all right with it—Flore, do you want to come with us?” I asked.

“What? You sure?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “That’ll be the safest way for us to travel.”

“Mm, yeah. I think so too,” Flore responded.

“So you agree then, right?” I turned toward my family. “And all of you are okay with it too?”

They were all nodding with the same expression of amused resignation. I decided to pretend I hadn’t seen Jolanda’s wide-eyed tension. She was still hiding in the shadow of a tree.

As for the food issue...it would work out somehow. Jolanda had brought her own, and we had extras since the trip would end up shorter than we’d planned. *Push comes to shove, we can all eat a little less.*

“Thanks, everybody!” Flore said with a carefree—that really was the most fitting adjective for it—smile, bouncing with excitement.

And so, with our party having increased by one member, we Black Forest Explorers delved deeper on our quest for the rainbow stone of rumors.

Conversation flowed freely as we continued on our way. The topic of the hour was Flore's life as a mercenary.

The person who showed the most interest was the Rose of the Duel Grounds, Diana. "Your lifestyle isn't as tiresome as I thought," she commented, engaged in Flore's story.

"Well, duh. No one's gonna join if the job's a nightmare," Flore replied.

"You have a point."

I remember Diana asking Helen a lot of questions too. What am I going to do if one day she suddenly says she's going to become a mercenary?

When asked about what Helen was like on the job, Flore's response was, "Sis here is in a class of her own. That's the only way I can put it."

"H-Hey," Helen protested, flustered. A blush rose to her face.

"It's fine, isn't it?" I said, trying to placate her. "She's paying you a compliment." Since I wasn't the target, it was easy to stay cool.

"I've thought about picking up dual blades myself after watching Sis," Flore said.

"Really?" I asked.

"But I'm not nearly as fast as she is, so I gave it up. I stick to the classics. My sword and shield are my partners," Flore declared, lifting her shield. The shield was wounded in several places. Carved into the surface was proof of the numerous battlefields she'd survived.

"It's a well-made shield," I commented.

"You think?"

"Yeah. I swear on my reputation as a blacksmith."

Flore grinned. "Heh heh, thanks." I smiled back.

We continued deeper into the forest, enveloped by this peaceful atmosphere...with one exception. Like an introvert that doesn't know what to do when met with an extrovert, Jolanda still couldn't meet Flore's eyes.

We journeyed onward, stopping for a short lunch break midway. The mood was spirited and lively, in part thanks to Flore's personality. When the sky had taken on an orange hue, Jolanda announced to everyone, "We're almost there."

"At last," I said.

"I can't wait!" cried Rike excitedly. Out of all of us, she might've been the most excited to find the rainbow stone.

"I hope it's something we can forge with," I said.

"And I can't wait to see what you're going to make with it, Boss." Rike's eyes glittered. She turned to look up at the sky—apparently, weapons, tools, and other products only she could see were dancing in a line above her head.

Flore asked Helen, "Then your mission will be complete, Sis?" The two of them were talking off to the side.

"Yeah, that's right."

Krul and Lucy trotted beside us, their footsteps light, as if they could sense the easygoing mood we were all in. Seeing them in high spirits, Diana was happy as well.

"Ah, look there," Jolanda said from the head of the party as she pointed in front of her.

I followed her finger and saw a small hill in a clearing. The hill was striped with something rainbow, and quite a lot of it.

"Wow, how nostalgic," Samya said, moved by the sight.

She remembers it fondly then.

I squinted. "So that's the stone you were talking about. It certainly is pretty." In a world dyed golden orange by the setting sun, the stone stripes alone were multicolored. It was a strange sight to behold, but it was genuinely beautiful.

We quickened our steps. The bedrock was exposed on the outcrop, and there were several different colors of rock banding the hill, but only a portion of them glittered rainbow.

We approached the rainbow stone. Everyone leaned down to peer closer at it.

Lidy ran a finger over the stone. "I see," she murmured. "It takes on seven different colors."

I recalled an old game from Earth that also focused on "seven colors"...but it was a reference that would be lost on everyone in this world.

"Is it solid?" I asked.

Lidy checked with her finger. "Yes, fairly. We might need a hammer or chisel to help dig it up."

I considered how late it was in the day. *If we start now, the sun will have completely set by the time we finish. We originally planned to stay one more night anyway, so why not check out the surroundings, set up camp for the night, and save the digging for the morning?*

"It's beautiful," Rike said, running a hand across the stone. With her fingers, she softly pried at a piece that was beginning to split off. It fell apart easily, still rainbow hued, and she held it up to the setting sun.



However, in the next instant, all the color and brilliance of the stone bled out like melting snow flurries. It became a gray lump, no different from any normal stone.

As one, the entire family sighed in disappointment.

“Did you see it?” I asked Lidy, who was watching from the side. She nodded. “Yes. The magical essence bled out.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Right before the stone had lost its shine, I saw its glow intensify and the sparkling particles contained within scatter into the air. Apparently, Lidy had seen the same thing.

“That means, like you suggested before, if I can imbue it with magical energy, perhaps we can preserve—”

I bit off my words as a shiver ran down my spine. Though I had no proof that anything was wrong, my senses were screaming “Danger!”

I whirled around, yelling, “Helen!”

“I know!” she shouted back. She must have sensed it too.

Lucy was barking as well.

“Rike, Diana, Lidy—you three take Krul and Lucy over there,” I commanded.

They nodded and ran off. Helen was staring fiercely into the distance, so the women took the two animals in the direction opposite of her gaze.

“Samya and Jolanda, you’re with me and Helen. Sorry, but you too, Flore.”

“Leave it to me!” Flore said, flexing her muscles. She certainly looked trustworthy.

Unfortunately, in the last several seconds, the chills running through me had only intensified. The five of us got into formation, turning to face the direction the threat was coming from. Helen, Flore, and I took the front, while Samya and Jolanda took the rear.

While we wavered over whether to take out our weapons, a certain series of sounds became audible to our ears.

Snap, crack, snap... Thud! Snap, crack, snap... Thud!

It was the sound of trees falling. The sound continued, growing closer and closer. As it grew louder, my sense of foreboding rose.

Without anyone taking the lead, without thinking consciously about what we would do, we brought up our weapons simultaneously. We could still hear the snapping and thuds coming from in front of us.

But then, I noticed something unusual.

“There’s...too many?” I muttered.

The thuds were definitely from trees crashing to the ground, and the snaps and cracks were from the tree trunks breaking. But the

number of thuds didn't match the number of snaps.

"Helen," I said.

She replied, "It's almost here."

Just as she predicted, the falling trees were soon close enough that we could see them collapse through the gaps of the trunks in front of us...along with glimpses of the threat that was heading for us.

If it's what I think it is...then we couldn't have ended up in a worse situation...

The tree before us crashed to the ground, and a lizard-like head rose up in front of us. The beast fixed us with its stare, its eyes narrowing. Beneath its piercing gaze, my body froze for an instant.

The monster we were facing resembled a giant lizard—in any number of different worlds, this beast was considered to be the strongest living creature.

Looming before us was a dragon.

Chapter 9: The Dragon

The dragon glowered at us, and then it roared so loudly that I thought my eardrums might burst. The earth quaked, and the sound reverberated through my bones, making my entire body tremble. A pair of wings protruded from the dragon's back. Biologically speaking, they didn't look strong enough to support the dragon's weight in flight, but such things probably departed from the realm of science.

With slow, creeping steps, we retreated down the hill. But for every step we took backward, the dragon advanced one forward into the clearing, like it was following us.

"Damn it! Where'd this bastard come from?!" Helen spat under her breath.

Had it nested here all along? Or had it flown in from somewhere? Even if it had come from somewhere else, no one would have noticed its arrival in this dense and crowded forest.

We all had our weapons ready, but no one was foolhardy enough to rush forward. Once the dragon knew that none of us were going to attack, it swung its head to look around the hill instead. The beast ambled forward, shaking the ground slightly with every footstep. At the hill, it used its pointed claws to dig up some of the rainbow stone. Before the stone went dull, the dragon popped some into its mouth; its jaws worked as if chewing.

No... There was no doubt about it. The dragon actually *was* eating the stone. We could hear the low sound of its teeth grinding.

"Let's retreat while it's distracted," I whispered to Helen.

She nodded. "Good idea."

I looked back toward where Diana and the others were waiting and gestured for them to withdraw into the forest. They nodded and did as I ordered. Krul and Lucy obediently followed without making a single sound.

Softly and quietly, we retreated. I assumed that Samya and Jolanda were doing the same, though since my eyes never left the dragon, I couldn't know for sure.

However, one person stayed rooted: Flore. She faced the dragon without moving.

"What the hell are you doing? Let's go!" Helen called out in a quiet but clear voice. She yanked on Flore's arm.

Flore turned to look at Helen, but worryingly, her eyes looked

unfocused. I was about to say as much to Helen, but that was when the dragon spun to face us. A shiver ran down my back.

“Run!” I shouted. “Helen—carry Flore and go!”

“Got it!”

Helen swiftly picked up Flore and threw the younger mercenary over her shoulders. Once I made sure Helen had Flore, I sprinted toward Diana and the others. I couldn’t tell where they were, so they must’ve hidden away in the forest.

Samya and Jolanda made full use of the beastfolks’ powerful leg muscles, sprinting forward at great speed. I ran with all my might, drawing closer to the border between the sea of trees and the clearing.

Helen ran past me with Flore on her shoulders. She wasn’t called Lightning Strike for nothing. Before I knew it, I’d taken on the role of rear guard. I’d planned to do so anyway, so it all worked out.

The dragon roared again, and the sound hurtled toward me like bullets of air pounding at my back. I kept an eye out behind me even as I ran, but the dragon didn’t make any moves to come for us. Maybe it had roared just to be intimidating...but I had no assurance of that. I kept running desperately.

Diana peeked out from between the trees. “This way!”

I pivoted toward her, and behind us, the dragon bellowed again. Helen and I flew into the forest, almost as if the roar had propelled us forward.

After reconvening with the others, we kept running as a pack. Flore was now back on her feet and keeping pace.

When some time had passed, I dropped my speed and asked, “It’s not chasing us, right?”

Samya peeked behind us. “Doesn’t look like it.”

We all slowed and then stopped.

“That gave me a shock!!!” Flore yelled, collapsing to the ground.

I’m in perfect agreement with you there...

Lucy padded over to the prone Flore and licked her face. The mercenary squealed and laughed.

“Should you be so loud?” Jolanda asked, her gaze flicking around at our surroundings.

“It should be fine,” Lidy answered in a quiet but firm voice. We all looked at her. She shrunk into herself slightly but continued, “When Diana hollered back there to tell you where to go, the dragon didn’t so much as glance at her.”

“Its hearing must not be good,” Helen said.

Lidy nodded. “However, it did look directly at us, so I don’t think there’s any problem with its vision.”

“Then we’re probably fine in the forest where there’s low visibility.”

“I agree.”

In any case, we’d managed to escape from the critical situation. First things first...

“Let’s find somewhere to camp,” I declared. It was almost completely dark. We had to find a place to sleep while there was still a little light left to see by.

“I know a good place,” Jolanda said. “Follow me.”

She took the lead. Flore sprang to her feet as well. No one’s footsteps could be described as light or easy, but we were all steady on our feet.

Pop! Crackle! The wood snapped in the fire. Outside, dusk had fallen, but it didn’t matter much here. The members of Forge Eizo were staying in a cave for the night.

Jolanda had shown us the way, explaining in a soft but clear voice, “It won’t be able to follow us in here.”

We’d set up camp near the entrance, but apparently, we would be able to retreat farther if we found ourselves in a pinch. Deeper in, we would be safe even if the dragon unleashed its fire breath.

We hadn’t stopped by a water source to refill our supply, so we brewed tea with our reserves and ate a dinner of dried meat heated over the campfire.

I was stroking Krul on the head. She was already deeply asleep.

“In times like these, it’s a blessing to have Krul with us since she doesn’t eat much,” I remarked.

“A horse couldn’t withstand these conditions,” Helen replied, chewing heartily on some jerky.

Horses needed feed, water, salt, and other replenishments, not to mention a large amount of each. All of the horse’s supplies would need to be brought along too. A short, casual road trip like the one we had planned would’ve been difficult with a horse. The more luggage we had to carry, the fewer route options we would’ve had.

In contrast, Krul was able to carry quite a lot, and she needed almost no food. Of course, that was because she was using magic to replenish her energy, so the advantage of her low appetite disappeared quickly outside of the Black Forest.

“Drakes don’t eat a lot?” Flore asked. She was also chewing on jerky.

“This little one is special,” I said. “The amount of food she needs is completely different from other drakes.”

“Ohhh.”

I hid any mention of magic from my explanation. I was sure Flore would agree if I asked her not to say anything, but she couldn’t spill what she didn’t know in the first place. It was better not to burden her

with anything unnecessary, I figured.

After we ate, Samya threw out the question, "So, what do we do now?"

"We have a few options," I began. "Number one: we go home. That's the best option if we want to avoid any trouble." I counted on my fingers. "Two: we wait until the dragon leaves before harvesting the rainbow stone. The downside there is we don't know how long it's going to stay." I lifted a third finger. "Three..."

Gulp. Everyone swallowed audibly.

"We kill it."

Someone gasped.

This last option was usually dismissed with a laugh.

"There shouldn't be many consequences even if we leave it be, but there's one thing that bothers me," I admitted.

"What is it?" Rike asked with a slight tilt of her head.

Instead of answering, I asked, "Why do you think it chose to eat the rainbow stone?"

The dragon had dug the stone up with its claws and eaten it. This specific type of stone is imbued with magic. Putting that together with the fact that Krul was a descendant of dragons (far apart as they were in terms of blood)...

Lidy announced the answer. "It was taking in magic?"

"Most likely. Otherwise, there's no way for it to maintain a body that size."

Actually, there had been giant reptiles back in my previous world too, so it was biologically possible for them to survive without magic. However, doubtlessly, magic was a much more efficient form of nourishment.

"And where in the forest has a dense concentration of magical energy?" I asked.

"Ohhh..."

The entire family sighed after considering my words. The Black Forest was rich with magic, but there was one place that had a particularly high dose of it, a place that animals avoided, where trees didn't grow. Everyone in the family would've known the answer in a heartbeat.

Because that location...was none other than our home.

"Suppose it goes flying around looking for magical substances to use as food. Even if it leaves the vicinity, it's only a matter of time before we run into it again," Diana said.

I nodded. "It would be better for us if it can't come knocking at our door all of a sudden, saying, 'Hello, it's me. The dragon.'"

Today's adventures would pale in comparison to the resulting chaos of such a scene, if it came to pass. I had no idea where the

dragon had come from, but it was fortunate that the beast hadn't dropped in on the forge.

Helen cocked her head. "In that case, our only option is..."

"To defeat it," Jolanda declared with a quiet whistle. "Though I'm not keen to do so."

Rike looked with surprise at Jolanda, who was curling in slightly on herself.

Our opponent might be a dragon, but it was still a part of this world's natural ecosystem. I was unsure whether I could, in good conscience, get rid of it for my own convenience when I was the one who had come from a different world. I was only a tenant of this world, so to speak—if anything, *I* should've been the one to leave.

However, Forge Eizo had already become home to our normal, everyday life. Given the opportunity to get rid of a threat with relatively little impact on our home, I wanted nothing more than to take it.

Apologies, Mr. Dragon (or it could be Ms. Dragon, for all I know), but you're going to have to forgive us for taking you down.

"We're gonna kill it?" Flore asked in a loud voice. "I want to...but is it doable?"

Her concern was understandable. My whole body had been chilled through when I'd faced it. All of my senses had been shouting that the dragon was not something to be opposed. It was only natural to question whether we could kill it or not. But even so...

"I'm here. You're here too," Helen reassured Flore. "And Eizo may not look like it, but he's no slouch."

Flore looked at me in surprise. I only shrugged in response.

Helen continued, "Besides, Samya, Jolanda, and Lidy are skilled archers. In my opinion, we have a solid chance of winning." She slapped her chest with conviction.

Flore considered Helen's words. Her face, screwed up in concentration, was lit by the flames of the campfire and painted red. I'd thought of Flore as a hothead who acted before she thought, but apparently, she had a serious side too.

Now that I thought about it, when we'd first met, Flore had told us that she'd defended herself during a confrontation with a boar. She must be the type to know her own strengths and limits, a person who chooses her battles accordingly. If not, she never would have survived all this time as a mercenary.

Finally, Flore spoke again. "If you say so, Sis. I trust you..."

Helen slapped her firmly on the back. "Then it's decided."

"Let's get some sleep for tomorrow," I suggested. "We're in a cave, but Helen and I will rotate standing watch."

"You can count on me," Helen said.

We turned in early to restore our energies in preparation for the unexpected battle before us.

Once again, like the previous night, I woke to my body being rocked. I opened my eyes and saw Helen's face before me.

"Time to switch?" I mumbled.

"Yeah. I don't mind staying on watch either," Helen said.

"Don't be ridiculous," I countered. "You're playing the leading role tomorrow. We'll be in trouble if you feel unwell from lack of sleep. Though I'm sure it's unlikely."

Helen pursed her lips. "It's not gonna happen."

I didn't truly believe that Helen's skills would dull from losing a couple hours of sleep, but our opponent was not one to be underestimated.

"By the way, how strong is Flore?" I asked.

"She's a genius," Helen answered without pausing.

"You're so quick to compliment her."

"It's the truth. Geniuses do actually exist. It's not like she came from a family of knights or anything, and you'd never guess it from her looks, but she's awesome."

Huh... A swordsman that's called a genius by the famous Lightning Strike?

"I'd still win in a one-to-one fight, though," Helen said. "And if it's you, Eizo? Well, you might win one in ten."

"Can she really be called a genius if she'd lose so easily to you?" I asked with a wry smile.

Helen laughed. "You'll get your chance to watch her up close tomorrow."

"Sure. I'll wait and see."

Helen lay down, and soon, I heard her breathing deepen. I stared into the flames of the campfire, preoccupied with thoughts of tomorrow's battle.

Chapter 10: The Showdown

Dawn broke. We all washed up and got ready, exchanging very few words among ourselves. We didn't bring any changes of clothing, so we had little to prepare. Even Diana, who had needed a little extra time yesterday morning, didn't dally at all today.

Our escape last night had been a mad scramble, but Jolanda still remembered the way back. Once again, she took the lead as we headed back into the forest.

I turned to Rike. "Best if you keep to the rear."

Rike's combat abilities were limited. She may have been able to fight off a few bandits, but needless to say, a dragon would certainly be too much for her to handle.

Diana nodded with a serious expression. "I agree. Watch over Krul and Lucy, and if worst comes to worst, take care of them."

"Right," I confirmed. "Now, the only question is, will the dragon still be there?"

"I think so," replied Lidy, glancing around at our surroundings. "That location is a valuable feeding ground."

"I think you're right." The rainbow stone was unlikely to be a common commodity, and to the dragon, it must've been a precious treat. As far as I'd seen yesterday, the hill had been streaked with plenty of the stone...so much that even a dragon wouldn't have been able to gobble it all up in a single night.

"It'll be there, or it won't," Flore added offhandedly.

That was true enough as well.

"Eizo, somehow I feel like your penchant for getting wrapped up in trouble is spreading to the rest of us," Rike remarked with a laugh.

The rest of my family hurtled agreements through the air. I deliberately let my shoulders droop, and the responding laughter reverberated through the forest.

From the merry atmosphere, you never would've thought that we were about to head into battle. However, that was just Forge Eizo's Secret Technique: the Art of Relaxation... Well, that's what I want to call it at least.

We returned to yesterday's clearing. From between the trees, we could see the dragon facing away from us, busy unearthing the rainbow stone. There was more of the stone left than I'd expected, but the dragon likely only dug up what it could eat.

With her eyes on the dragon, Helen whispered, "It sure doesn't waste any time. Busy at work, bright and early."

"Thanks to that, we've got our opening," I replied. "Let's go."

Helen, Flore, and I crept slowly toward the dragon's back. It hadn't noticed us yet. Like Lidy had said, it must not have possessed a good sense of hearing.

As an apex predator, it didn't need to watch out for enemies. In addition, because magic was its primary food source, it would've evolved to sense magical essence—I'd be hard-pressed to believe that magic made any audible sounds, so it didn't need acute hearing.

Nevertheless, we knew the dragon could see perfectly fine. It likely had a sharp nose too. At the moment, it was distracted by the smorgasbord in front of it. However, had it been using all of its senses, our cover would've been blown immediately.

"Rushing at it headlong is too risky," I murmured under my breath.

Next to me, Helen nodded. "If only we had something like a bola."

Bolas were projectile weapons composed of two weights attached by a cord. They could be launched at an enemy to ensnare them and seal their movements.

"Bolas that are big enough to stop such a humongous beast would be no picnic to throw...but next time we fight a dragon, I'll make sure we have some on hand," I promised jokingly.

Helen chuckled. "I'd rather not make a regular habit of this."

"Good point," I said, offering a smile.

In contrast, Flore huffed. "Really? I could do this all day." She was seemingly in the opposite camp.

"Say that once you've gotten faster," Helen retorted, her lips quirked upward in a sardonic smile.

"Boooo!" Flore pouted.

This relaxed atmosphere lasted for only a second—in the next instant, I heard a whistling sound. I watched as three arrows cut through the air, flying toward the dragon. Only one found its mark, slipping between two scales and embedding itself deep into the dragon's flesh, but it was enough.

"GROOOAAAR!!!" The dragon howled in pain.

Helen didn't let her chance escape. She dashed toward the beast, twin tails of blue light trailing behind her.

"Get its legs!" I yelled.

"I know!" Helen shouted back just as loudly.

She was at the base of the beast in the blink of an eye. Blue lines of light twined around the dragon's legs. She drove her shortswords into its flesh, slicing off its scales. The appoitakara-made weapons immediately proved their worth.

“Not deep enough!” Helen cursed, visibly irritated.

I thought she had done plenty, but she was clearly dissatisfied.

“I’ll take over from here!” Flore called out.

She was a touch slower than Helen, but she didn’t give the dragon time to recover from the attack that’d ripped scales from its leg. She brandished her long dagger with a speed nearly rivaling Helen’s and stabbed the dragon a hair’s breadth from where Helen had laid bare its flesh. Blood spurted into the air like a bloom of red blossoms.

“GYAAAAH!” For a second time, the dragon roared. This was possibly the first instance in its life that it had tasted such pain. Naturally, it was confused, and its movements grew dull as a result.

“Amazing what she can do with such a small blade...” I mumbled without thinking.

Helen, who’d temporarily retreated next to me, replied, “I told you. She’s a genius with a blade.”

“We don’t have the time to be talking about this.”

“Right!” Helen declared, rushing forward again.



I was slower than the two mercenaries, but I ran behind them toward our target. As Helen had demonstrated earlier, appoitakara weapons could tear off a dragon's scales, and few materials were more precious than those scales.

But...this was hardly the time to be thinking about that.

Three bolts of blue lightning flashed through the air. Two were Helen's, and the remaining one was mine. When Helen and Flore's opening attacks had threatened its balance, the dragon had only narrowly recovered—now, our light assaulted the weak leg once more. Flowers of blood bloomed afresh, and the dragon's pained cry echoed through the Black Forest.

"You're not bad, Eizo!" Flore said with a wide grin.

Helen's attack had landed on the dragon's vulnerable flesh, but I had only gotten its scales. My aim was just minutely off.

On the other hand, Flore sliced into the dragon's flesh with deadly accuracy, reprising her attack from earlier. Her blade cut into the patch I had just uncovered.

The dragon had now been wounded twice in the same leg by strikes that should've been lethal...to any other creature. Even a stout animal—like a large black bear—would've fallen to those injuries. But this was a dragon we were dealing with. Somehow, it was still standing.

"Shit!" I immediately launched myself backward, falling away in retreat.

Helen also distanced herself in an instant. We had to put space between us and the dragon, lest we be obliterated by a fire-breath attack.

But Flore chose differently. With another fearless grin, she closed in on the leg she'd injured a second ago.

"No, you idio—!" Helen cried out frantically.

Flore seemed to have heard Helen, but the carnivorous smile didn't disappear from her face. She struck again at the gash in the dragon's leg.

We heard the dragon's anguished bellow a third time. "*GROOOWL!*" This time, I heard rage in its voice too.

That was why Helen had been so panicked—angering the dragon was not worth the small benefit of landing a clumsy blow. This was the difference in experience between Helen and Flore as mercenaries and, more simply, as fighters.

Burning with wrath, the dragon drew its head back.

"Damn it! Everyone, get down!!!" Helen hollered, her voice booming through the clearing.

I immediately dropped to the ground. A second later, I felt

scorching heat on my back, followed by a low rumbling sound. The heat disappeared in an instant.

I was uninjured and grateful to Helen from the bottom of my heart. No way I would've stood a chance had I taken that blast straight on.

There was no question what the heat I'd felt had been—the dragon's fire breath. Luckily, our enemy was a standard fire-breathing dragon. We were ill-equipped to deal with poison or another special element.

Helen spat out a *tsk*. "If it can breathe fire, we'll be in trouble if we drag this out for too long."

I nodded. "Yeah, you're right."

We had to kill it quickly. A barrage of fire breaths would wipe us out. Since we had already injured it, the dragon would likely give chase even if we ran. The good news was, it appeared not to be able to breathe fire quickly in succession.

Now was our chance.

Without exchanging another word, Helen, Flore, and I reoriented toward the dragon and sprinted forward. Helen reached it first. She leaped into the air before it could react and slashed her swords down on its neck. Then, she darted past the beast.

"ROOOOAAAR!" The dragon let out another bellow of anguish.

In my previous world, dragons from the east were said to have a scale on the base of their throats that grew in the opposite direction from all the others. That was around the place where Helen had cut this dragon.

The beast stumbled, and I rushed in. It should've had time to react, but because of the deep wound it'd sustained, its reflexes were sluggish. I sliced the dragon at its throat just like Helen had. The scales there had already been torn off, so I was able to hack even deeper into its neck.

Immediately after came a blaze of light—Flore. Even though she wasn't wielding weapons made of appoitakara like Helen and me, her attack cleaved nearly halfway through the dragon's neck. It was a critical hit made possible by her innate talents.

"We've done it for sure...!" Flore shouted.

But the dragon's eyes still burned with fury. With a burst of energy, it drew its shredded neck back.

It's going to spit fire again!

"Shit!" I cursed.

I would've charged again, but Flore was in the way. Between them, there was a gap only the width of a sheet of paper—from my current position, it was impossible to attack with such precision.

Well, it was impossible for *me*, but...

Helen called out, "I got it!" Twin strikes of blue lightning streaked through the air. Helen slashed at the dragon's throat at the speed of light.

The dragon stopped dead in its tracks.

I expected a column of flame to come raging at us any second. However, from our positions, it was impossible to dive to the ground and dodge the attack. Instinctively, I screwed my eyes shut.

But the wave of heat didn't come.

Tentatively, I opened my eyes again. The dragon's head was hanging on by a scrap of skin.

"Th-There's no way it can recover from that...right?" I muttered.

However, Helen yelled, "Get away!"

Flore and I scrambled back. The dragon's body was still moving.

No way. It's still alive after nearly being beheaded?!

Long story short, it was all a misunderstanding on our part—the dragon's body pitched forward and crashed to the ground with a thunderous thud.

"We did it!" Samya whooped, her voice as loud as a tiger's roar.

That was when we finally internalized what had happened.

Our cheers rang throughout the previously silent forest. Our shouts of joy lifted toward the sky, and they didn't stop for quite some time.

Chapter 11: Until We Meet Again

Having slain the dragon, the first order of business was to finish our original mission: excavation.

The dragon had eaten up swathes of the rainbow stone, but we were able to harvest some using the hammers and chisels Krul had been carrying for us. The stones maintained their iridescence for all of a split second before, as expected, all their magical energy dispersed, and their colors bled away completely.

I hammered one of the now-gray stones. Thanks to the powers I'd been granted, I was indeed able to imbue the stone with a little bit of magic with every strike. However...

"Hmmm, this is no good," I muttered.

Rike was beside me, watching my movements intently. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. No doubt about it, I *can* weave magic into the stone. See?" I hit the stone several more times. The spot took on a faint rainbow sheen, but in the next second, the color dulled and disappeared. "But the magic scatters instantly."

"I see now." Rike sighed.

"Another thing," I continued, digging up another piece of the stone. While it was still glimmering and rainbow, I swung my hammer down at it. The stone crumbled.

"It's too brittle."

All the metals I'd worked with so far had become harder when I imbued them with magic. Even steel was no exception. However, the rainbow stone became more fragile with magic, and it even felt different when it was fresh out of the earth. There must have been other forces at play besides the simple dispersal of magic.

"Eeerm, you're right. This isn't usable," Rike conceded.

"It might behave differently if I heated it first and then hammered it, like we do steel, but..."

"Shall we take some home?"

"Hmmm."

I felt conflicted. I could certainly try and heat it in the forge. In the worst-case scenario, even if it couldn't be used to make weapons, maybe it could be made into jewelry. We could at least keep some around for me to experiment on in my spare time.

"All right, let's bring back a little," I decided. "Just enough to

make one knife.”

One knife’s worth of material was roughly the amount we had already dug up. I gathered it all into a leather pouch and threw it into a bag Krul was carrying.

Then, there was the matter of the dragon’s remains.

“What in the world?” Diana exclaimed. “It’s gone all jiggly.”

“Right now, massive amounts of magic are pouring out of the dragon,” Lidy explained.

“Seriously? Should we be worried?”

“The energy won’t stagnate here, so it will be fine,” Lidy reassured her. “The concentration is slightly stronger than around the forge. It’ll dissipate into the environment.”

“Isn’t the magic dense where we live compared to the rest of the forest?”

“That’s right.”

“So...are you sure it’ll be all right?” Diana asked dubiously.

“Yes,” Lidy confirmed.

The dragon’s corpse had indeed taken on a jelly-like consistency. In fantasy settings, dragon scales were renowned for being impenetrably hard, but apparently the stereotype didn’t hold true in this world. The scale Diana was holding was slightly flexible and resembled a piece of rubber.

I told the others my theory: “It must be magic that gives dragon scales their durability.”

“It would appear so,” Lidy replied.

Magic was what supported a dragon’s gigantic body. Most likely, it helped the beast fly, breathe fire, and it even toughened their scales.

Diana held up the floppy scale. “Can we use this for anything?”

Next to Diana was Rike, whose eyes were sparkling.

I picked up a scale too. “Hmmm.”

Given my tests with the rainbow stone, I bet any magic I imbue in the scale will disperse anyway.

I hammered the scale experimentally to refill it with magic. That magic instantly scattered into the air, and the scale didn’t even harden.

Even if I heated the scale, it was unlikely I’d be able to use it. Since it was organic matter, the scale was different from the rainbow stone. I didn’t know if it had the same composition as organic materials from my previous world, but it didn’t seem like it would be able to withstand large amounts of heat without magic supporting it. Same with the dragon’s eyes and fangs.

I’d had an inkling that this was the case since I couldn’t remember ever hearing of weapons or armor in this world made from the body parts of dragons (granted, I’d had few opportunities to hear such

rumors). It could be that nothing like that had ever been made in the first place.

Though, it's a different story if I can think of some process to prevent magic from diffusing out of a material...

"It seems difficult," I finally concluded. "But, it also feels unseemly to leave empty-handed. Why don't we bring back some of the scales and fangs and a few portions of meat? We have no choice but to leave the rest behind."

"That's a pity," Rike lamented. She looked genuinely heartbroken to give everything up.

I wondered if she was upset that we weren't able to harvest more materials to use for blacksmithing, or if she was thinking about the wasted meat. I left the question unasked.

Butchering the dragon was easy—I was worried that it would be mostly sinew and tendons, but actually, there was lean, red meat on its bones. Its shortage of tendons was likely also due to the fact that it used magic to power its body.

Unlike the boar and deer I'd seen time and time again, I knew nothing of the intricacies of a dragon's anatomy. Obviously, I'd brought no prior knowledge from my last world, and the info didn't come with the installed data either.

However, I'd once eaten crocodile meat, which tasted like chicken but with a firmer and more chewy texture. If dragon meat was similar, then it was going to be a treat.

We packed the meat into a bag that we'd brought along "just in case we hunt anything along the way." Of course, back then, we hadn't anticipated taking down any prey *this* size. We stashed the fangs and scales in a separate bag.

When I tied the bag with the meat to Krul, Lucy padded up to me and pawed at my leg.

She must be begging for a snack.

"You want some?" I asked her.

"Yip!" she barked, her tail batting rhythmically left to right.

Looks like she has her eyes on the dragon meat.

"What should I do...?" I muttered.

I didn't really want to feed her raw meat—there could be parasites in it. But Lucy was waiting expectantly with her eyes aglitter and her tongue sticking out. How could I possibly dash all her high hopes...?

But after debating it, I decided I couldn't give her the meat after all, since it could damage her health. Lucy wilted when she realized she wasn't going to be fed, and guilt seized my heart.

Forgive me, my precious child! I'm doing this all for your sake!

"I promise you'll get some after we roast it," I said.

Lucy barked loudly as if she understood. "Arf! Arf!" Then, in high

spirits, she ran after Big Sis Krul, who had already set off.

“Let’s stop here for the day,” Jolanda suggested. “If I remember right, there’s a river over that way.”

With the Black Forest turning a dusky orange, she’d led us to a small clearing. This was to be our campsite tonight.

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed. “Why don’t we set up camp?”

It looked like we’d have to split into a few groups when we slept, but if we set up the campfire in the middle, whoever was standing guard would still be able to watch over everyone.

This was our third night sleeping outdoors. Used to the routine, we had everything ready and the campfire burning brightly in no time. The Black Forest had gradually turned from orange to the color of its namesake, but the dazzling fire lit up the inky darkness.

“I wonder how the meat is cooking,” I mused aloud to myself.

Fat dripped and popped over the fire. Skewered on branches we’d cleaned and roasting over the flames...was the dragon meat. Lucy circled the fire, waiting eagerly for her meal. I felt as if I could hear her asking, “Is it ready now? How ’bout now?”

Krul trilled, “*Kululululu*,” as if to calm the pup down. Lucy responded by toddling over to Krul and sitting down by the drake’s side.

A barrage of punches battered my shoulder.

“Say...” I said to the offender.

“What? What?” Diana asked.

“Do you think it’s okay to feed Krul this meat?”

“Huh? Oh...”

The assault on my shoulder halted.

No matter how you thought about it, Krul was definitely a different species from the dragon, but dragons were still a distant, distant ancestor of drakes. In other words...it could be considered cannibalism. The meat *was* normal, so in that sense, it was safe to give to Krul. There was just a question of ethics that Krul herself likely had no recognition of.

Diana eventually replied with, “Errr, well, it’s probably fine.”

Mother knows best.

I watched the dragon meat roast for a while longer and then checked to see if it was cooked through. When it was ready, I set aside some of it before adding salt and pepper to the rest. The unseasoned portions were, of course, for Krul and Lucy. I dished those onto wooden plates and passed them to Diana, who brought them to the animals.

She placed the plates on the ground. “Here you go.”

“*Kululululu*.”

“Yap!”

Krul and Lucy dug in. I wondered if they had been saying *itadakimasu* in their own way.

I turned to Diana. “Shall we eat as well?”

“Yeah, let’s!”

We called the others over, then all sat around the fire in a circle. Before we ate, we placed our palms together and said *itadakimasu*. Flore was able to follow along since we’d done the same thing yesterday.

Dinnertime!

“Now, let’s see. How does it taste?” I took a bite of the roasted dragon meat. Other than salt and pepper, it had no other seasonings.

I had expected the meat to be tough, but my teeth bit right through it. A piece tumbled into my waiting mouth. When I chewed experimentally, the juices and fat burst out.

“Whoa... This is...” I muttered incoherently.

Flavor-wise, it reminded me of crocodile meat. It tasted different from the boar and venison we usually ate, like chicken but gamier. It was light but had plenty of umami.

“De-LISH!” Samya hollered.

I understood how she felt. No one else shouted out loud, but everyone seemed to like it. Normally, the dinner table was lively with conversation, but today we ate bite after bite without saying a word.

“The taste is outta this world,” Flore said to Samya with a grin.

She smiled back. “I know!”

“This is my first time eating dragon meat,” the mercenary added.

“First time for me too.”

The two shared a laugh before returning to their meal.

“It may be tasty, but since we’ve never eaten it before, make sure you say something if you start feeling ill,” I warned everyone, including Samya and Flore.

Everyone nodded but didn’t say anything back, their mouths occupied. I sighed softly to myself and brought another bite of meat to my lips.

In the end, dinner concluded without incident. No one got an upset stomach or felt otherwise unwell. The only thing beyond calculation was that we finished all of the meat we’d taken. It had been so delicious that we had grilled it all up, and every last bit had ended up in our stomachs.

Lucy had overindulged, and she was now lying on her side, her belly bulging. Krul was sleeping next to her. She hadn’t gotten sick from the meal either and was peacefully dreaming, her breathing even.

We had discussed going back for more, but the round trip

would've taken too much time and the meat would've been starting to spoil, so we'd given up on the idea.

At the moment, all the others were asleep, including Helen—they lay scattered around the fire. I kept watch, casting my gaze into the forest. The hoot of what sounded like an owl echoed through the trees. My ears were perked for any unusual sounds as well, but it was a quiet night.

I'd taken my turn on watch for the past few nights, but no wolves or bears had come to ambush us, and we had spent every night in peace.

In the dead of night, after enough time had passed for me to feed the hungry fire several times with branches, I heard a rustling noise. I shifted my hand over *Diaphanous Ice* lying beside me. However, it was only Flore waking up.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Couldn't sleep?" I set the katana down again.

Flore shook her head slowly and grimaced. "I'm wide awake."

"You did fight a dragon today," I replied.

From that perspective, the others who were sleeping like babies were the bizarre ones. I smiled wryly.

"You're right. Is this seat free?" Flore asked, gesturing beside me.

"Be my guest."

"Don't mind if I do." Flore sat down silently next to me. I passed her a cup of the tea I'd brewed earlier, and she took it with a quiet "thanks."

For a while, we watched the campfire without saying anything.

"You know, I..." Flore's words tumbled into the silence. "I became a mercenary when I was still little. It was complicated in many ways."

She didn't seem to have any intention of telling me the details. No matter how outgoing she was, there were things you didn't share with an old man you'd just met.

"But," she continued, "Sis was the one who always took care of me."

"Is that so? Well, I can picture that," I said.

"No kidding." Flore chuckled. "At first, I wanted to become just like her, but...it's impossible." She furrowed her brows.

"Yeaah, that's a bit..."

"Right? But I figured if I did everything she did, someday I'd catch up."

"That's why you came here?"

Flore nodded. Her face was turned down, so I couldn't see her expression. "Sis didn't come back," Flore murmured. "I thought she came here to train or something."

"So, you wanted to try for yourself?" I asked.

Flore nodded again. "I came aaall the way here just to find that she's been chilling in the forest!" She huffed.

I could understand Flore's indignation. She'd thought the person she looked up to had been on a quest of improvement, even if that quest took a different direction from her own. Instead, the person in question was living a life of retirement.

"Do you want to live with us too?" I asked. "I don't mind. That way, you can train with Helen all you want." After all, Diana's swordsmanship was growing in leaps and bounds thanks to her sparring sessions with Helen.

Flore didn't respond for a moment, but then a smile, illuminated gently by the fire, rose to her face. "Sounds like a blast, but unlike Sis, the rugged uncle look just isn't my vibe."

I grimaced. "I don't think Helen's any different."

"Besides, I realized something today. Someday...I wanna surpass Sis." Flore grinned boldly. "And if I'm gonna do that, I can't be hanging out with her doing the same things all the time."

Belying her casual expression were her eyes, burning with a fierce determination.

"I see."

That's too bad.

Flore would've brightened up our everyday lives if she were around. *The others would be happy with a little sister.* But, looking at the resolve hidden behind her eyes, I realized that I shouldn't carelessly undermine her goal.

"Well...if you ever want to come hang out, talk to a merchant named Camilo in the city. Tell him I gave you my approval. He'll tell you where to go," I instructed her.

"I got it," Flore said. Her voice was soft, but on her face was a brilliant, ear-to-ear smile. She drained her tea and then declared, "I'm gonna sleep."

I watched her retreating back as she left the campfire.

"This is me!" Flore waved energetically, a huge grin on her face.

After one more night together in the Black Forest, we sought out the road. We were still north of the city, but this stretch of road was closest to where we'd exited the trees. Flore planned to head south through the city and straight back to the capital. I had offered to see her halfway, but she'd declined, saying she'd go alone.

Everyone, including Jolanda, called out to Flore. "See you!" Helen's voice was particularly loud.

Flore shouted back, matching decibel for decibel, "Until next time!"

In response, Krul trilled and Lucy barked again.

And so, we parted ways with Flore and returned to our lives as forest dwellers.

Epilogue: The Dragon Dyad

It was impossible to make weapons and armor from the body parts of a dragon.

In this world, that was common sense. Once a dragon was slain, nearly the entirety of its body became soft and gelatinous. Only their meat was good for consumption. It wasn't particularly nutritious, but at least it was said to be delicious.

A single sword and a set of armor lay before my eyes.

Presently, I was in the kingdom's treasure vault. I had been granted special permission to view these artifacts in a separate inspection room.

"They're stunning," I murmured.

"They are, aren't they?" the administrator said proudly, her head held high like she'd made them with her own hands. "What makes them so rare is that they're a matching set—the *only* such set to exist."

The two pieces shared a common design with a dragon's head as the center point. They were undeniably a pair, just as the administrator had said.

To the extent of my knowledge, there were no other examples in his portfolio where a sword and armor had been forged together. The artifacts before me were as rare as the Dragonslayer's mithril bolas, the heirloom passed down from generation to generation.

The pieces were lavish compared to his other works. He *had* forged other embellished pieces, the most extravagant of which were the dual blades—with their blue flow being the focal point of the design—that the mercenary Lightning Strike had wielded. Yet, those swords didn't hold a candle to the set before me. Which meant...

"Could it be that these were made to be purely ornamental?" I asked.

She brought one hand to her chin in thought. "The sword has been used once in the past as a test of the blade's edge. There is a record of it."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." She answered with a small smile, her hand still resting on her slim face. "It's written that the sword sliced through an iron pillar as broad as a man's chest without a whisper."

I hadn't been shocked by her reply; I was well aware that

soundlessness was practically a trademark of his work. The few of his remaining masterpieces boasted cutting edges equal or superior—as an unspoken rule—to the sword that was half of the Dragon Dyad, and there were various records in existence that bore evidence to the phenomenon. I had assumed that the set before me was unique because they were the only decorative items he had forged, but it appeared that wasn't the case.

“What you're saying is, he used the remains of a dragon as raw material—a feat that is said to be impossible—and forged something that goes well beyond simple functionality.”

“That's correct,” she replied.

“And records of his techniques...?”

“Do not exist,” replied the administrator bluntly. “These were the only items he made. It appears that his primary goal was to solve the technical problem of forging with a dragon's body parts.”

My eyes grew wide. “Oh, really?”

It was difficult to, out of the blue, swallow the concept that such unprecedented technology had been developed simply as an experiment...and that this technique had disappeared without a trace. Nevertheless, having chased after his shadow for so long, I felt a strange sort of trust toward her words. That was indeed part of his MO.

I moved past the issue and spoke again. “Apologies, but there's one more thing I'd like to verify.”

“Ah, *that*,” she replied without hesitation. “Of course.”

The administrator skillfully removed the inlays around the eye of the dragons on both the sword and the armor to reveal what appeared to be small cavities. But, upon closer inspection, I could see the curves and valleys on the surface. She tilted the artifacts to make it easier for me to see, laying bare the true nature of the hidden impressions.

Carved there were twin reliefs of the plump cat sitting on its haunches. In other words, they were both genuine Forge Eizo products.

“They're his works, no doubt about it,” I concluded out loud.

“Yes. He caused quite the commotion when he came in person to present them. It is unthinkable that they would be counterfeits.” Once again her voice was laced with pride.

“His visit was recorded as well?”

“Oh, no, not as such. However...”

“Go on,” I urged.

The administrator cleared her throat. “He brought them to my family's domicile.”

“What?”

“The story is a legend in the Schurter family,” she said. “I heard it

from my grandmother with my own ears, and she heard it from her mother—my great-grandmother.”

I cocked my head. “Schurter... Great-grand...” The name had a familiar ring to it. “Oh! Could you mean...?” I clapped my hands together. “The Demon of the Law!”

The administrator smiled despite the foreboding nickname. “Yes, that’s her. Frederica Schurter,” she confirmed.

The Demon of the Law had possessed a reputation for having an exhaustive knowledge of laws and regulations, which she had leveraged to protect people to the limit of her power. To her family, Eizo had granted a, safe to say, *unique* set of his work.

To me, the administrator’s story was a thread, one which formed an important connection in my head.

The Story of How We Met VII: A Certain Forest Abode

Gray hair flashed against the deep green of the forest. A young woman walked through the forest as casually as if she were taking a stroll, her body swaying with her stride.

However, this forest wasn't like all the other ones. The massive sea of trees was named the Black Forest, a place considered to be—and actually was—deadly.

Jolanda, a wolf-type beastfolk, was in high spirits after coming back from a hunt. The way she unconsciously swayed her body as she walked was one way she expressed her emotions.

She was well aware that she showed her mood subtly. She might never have noticed if not for her childhood friend who, unlike Jolanda, was vibrant and expressive. Whether that energy was because she was a tiger-type or because of her innate personality...was unclear. Having practically grown up together, Jolanda had been repeatedly confronted with her own lack of expressiveness, whether she had wanted it or not.

She had tried to show more of her feelings on her face, but it hadn't gone very well. Then, her friend had told her, "You are perfect just the way you are," and so she'd stopped forcing herself. She'd lived her life poker-faced ever since.

Presently, she was on the way back to her den with the prey she had caught.

Come to think of it, she hadn't seen her childhood friend around in the forest recently. She couldn't imagine anything happening to her spunky friend, but...

Beastfolk were known to change their dens periodically. *Perhaps we've just missed each other*, Jolanda thought as she hurried back home.

"Haaa...haaa..."

Jolanda panted as she tore through the forest at top speed—even among the beastfolk, she was very fast. Most pursuers would never have a hope of catching up. But if she were to slow even a little...

Desperately, she continued running.

She had gone back to her den with the spoils of her hunt, and after preparing them, she'd just turned her mind to lunch. Suddenly, she'd sensed something unpleasant from outside. Jolanda had rushed

out of her den in a hurry.

Her eyes had landed on a giant black bear.

Confronted with the number one threat among all the dangers of the forest, she'd lost her cool. Was it any wonder?

While the bear was still a distance away, she'd darted back into her den. Leaving her food where it was, she had packed up the essentials and flown back out.

When Jolanda had looked back, she'd realized something—she must've kicked the stand on the way out; the food had spilled. However, the bear had ignored the food completely as it invaded her den.

Jolanda ran with all her might to escape from the bear.

After a while, Jolanda stopped. "I-I should be far enough now..." Her instincts were telling her she had sprinted quite a distance.

She caught her breath and gathered her thoughts. "What do I do?"

If she waited, the bear might leave her den in favor of another location. The problem was that she would need a place to wait. It didn't need to be fancy—a simple shelter from the winds and rain would do. However, she couldn't think of many candidates. Jolanda turned to head to the nearest one.

That was when her ears picked up something—as far as she could tell, it was a number of people traveling together as a group.

Jolanda *tsked* without thinking. Maybe they were headed for the same place Jolanda was. If that were the case, she would have no choice but to go somewhere farther.

Her shoulders slumped. She had just about made up her mind to leave when she heard a new sound...the sound of a sharp, resonant whistle.

She knew it well.

That was her childhood friend's whistle. Her friend must be nearby. Fundamentally, beastfolk avoided traveling in packs, but Jolanda quickly shook off her qualms. She turned toward the direction her friend was waiting. After all, she also had to warn them about the bear waiting nearby.

Afterword

Greetings. We've made it to the fifth volume. This is the moonlight writer, Tamamaru, kicking it in my forties, just past one of the ages considered to be terribly unlucky in Japan.

In the previous volume's afterword, I alluded to the fact that Jolanda's role in the story had been substituted for another character's. That character is the wolf pup introduced in this volume, Lucy. I considered introducing her as a child of the beastfolk, but sadly, I had to abandon the idea because of her overwhelming popularity in the web novel. In the end, I kept her as is.

A character who has never appeared in the web version also took the stage in this volume: Helen's junior, Flore. Previously, the cast of characters limited to the novelization included Jolanda in the forest and Athena in the city, but there was no one in the capital. That's where Flore comes in. We will see her again—though it might not be in the next volume. A little something to look forward to for all of you who became fans this time.

The villain in this volume was the dragon. Volume one included the story of the Dragonslayer. Why Eizo predicted the need for the bolas and why he prepared ones with mithril cord all stem from his fight with the dragon this time around. Still, swarms of dragons would cause some problems, so they won't be appearing very frequently...in theory. Probably.

Incidentally, the second volume of the comics should be appearing on the shelves around the same time as this volume. The first two volumes cover the entirety of the first novel. Please consider buying them if you haven't already. The Eimoor Family's Predicament arc will be published in comic form as well, so I would be thrilled if you would read it all together.

Moving on to the acknowledgments.

I ask the impossible of Kinta-sensei each and every time. Please take my apologies and my gratitude both for the stunning designs of the new characters, Flore and Lucy, and the bounty of wonderful illustrations.

As always, I look forward to the amazing work of Himori Yoshi-sensei on the comics. Thank you very much.

To my former editor, S-san, you have my sincerest thanks. My new editor, I-san, has pulled out all the stops, for which I am grateful.

I thank my friends, my mother and my little sister, and the two cats, Chama and Konbu from whom I receive the energy to go on.

To my grandma: have you met up with grandpa and dad yet? It's still too early for me to join you over there, but I would be happy if you will all watch over me for a little while longer.

Last but not least, thank you, thank you, thank you to all of the readers who have stayed with me all this time.

See you in volume six!



SAMYA

A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

DIANA

The precious daughter of the Eimoor comital family. She's a tomboy who loves swordplay.

LIDY

An emissary from an elven village. Knowledgeable about magic.

HELEN

A mercenary dubbed Lightning Strike. Commissioned a set of custom model swords from Eizo.

RIKE

A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World

5



I had no proof that
anything was wrong,
but my senses
were screaming
"Danger!"

In any number
of different worlds,
this beast was considered
to be the strongest
living creature.

*Looming
before us was
a dragon.*

... **EIZO** ...

A man who loves cats
and working with his hands.
Formerly a corporate drone.

... **FLORE** ...

An exceptionally talented
young mercenary.

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

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by Tamamaru

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Edited by C.D. Leeson

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